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Lukácsian Reification in the Twenty-First Century

By

Dominic Kenneth Mario Pizzolitto

A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies Through the Department of
Philosophy in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at
the University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Lukácsian Reification in the Twenty-First Century

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Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

It's a paper about Lukács' notion of reification and how it should be interpreted to best suit the needs of critical theory in the twenty-first century.

Dedication

The only role proper to philosophy is to lend a voice to suffering. This paper is dedicated to all those who have lived and died under reified social relations.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This paper will examine Lukács' concept of reification in light of contemporary social political theory. While reification will always remain a pertinent topic for those interested in the intellectual history of Western Marxism, there is a more specific occasion for the current discussion of the topic. In the era of globalization, digital media and the Anthropocene, contemporary discourse has started to focus on questions of subjectivity, sovereignty, and the consequences of unfettered capitalist production. The reality of climate change, the rise in populist politics, and the frequency of economic crises demonstrate that we are facing unprecedented social problems on a systematic level, and yet , no one seems to have a clear idea of what the problem is. There is a persistent sense of what Mark Fisher calls 'capitalist realism,' the sense that capitalism, while problematic, is merely 'the way of the world,' an unchangeable reality on the same level as the movement of the solar system and the inevitability of death.

In an early formulation of the idea of 'capitalist realism', a line often attributed to Fredric Jameson claims that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."¹ Reification is the name of the process through which the 'permanent' and 'naturalistic' semblance of capitalism comes about. For Lukács, reification is an extension of the problems growing out of Marx's discussion of the fetish character of commodities. The essence of the fetish character of commodities has its basis in that "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires 'a phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all embracing as to

¹ This quotation is notoriously difficult to track down. Sometimes it is attributed to Mark Fisher, other times to Slavoj Žižek. However in this context the importance is the poetic value of the line itself rather than attempting to establish a fact or argument.

conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács 83). In order to tackle this problem, it is necessary to consider reification both as ‘an objective form’ *and* as a ‘subjective stance’ corresponding to it (Lukács 84). As a problem specific to the age of modern capitalism, the question of reification becomes: “how far is commodity exchange, together with its structural consequences, able to influence the *total outer and inner* life of society?” (Lukács 84).

The present discussion will focus on Lukács’ concept of reification as presented in *History and Class Consciousness*. After explicating Lukács’ notion of reification, the second half of this paper will turn to the work of Moishe Postone to argue that reification remains an invaluable critical tool for understanding contemporary social conditions. Following Postone, emphasis will be put on the objective categories of space and time in order to analyse the ways in which reification has transformed under late-capitalism. By way of conclusion, the work of social political philosopher Jeff Noonan will be used to consider the political implications of ‘free time’ in contradistinction to the domination of ‘abstract time’ under reified social relations.

The Fetish Character of the Commodity

The unequivocal starting point from which Lukács begins his discussion of reification is Marx’s discussion of the fetish character of the commodity as presented in the first volume of *Capital*. In the relevant chapter of *History and Class Consciousness* entitled ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,’ Lukács repeatedly states that reification is a “discussion of the problems growing out of the fetish character of

commodities” (Lukács 84). Further, Lukács claims that “the chapter dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism and the whole self-knowledge of the proletariat seen as the knowledge of capitalist society” (Lukács 170). The contrast Lukács is drawing here is instructive: he is asserting his own Marxian variation of the well known claim that “the chapter in Hegel’s *Logic* on Being, Non-Being and Becoming contains the whole of his philosophy” (Lukács 170).

Lukács’ comparison is instructive for interpretive purposes. The simplest way to read this passage would be to posit that Lukács was merely attempting to articulate that a particular section of Marx’s work should be granted the same degree of prevalence as a particular section of Hegel’s work. However, the relationship between Hegel and Marx does not grant us this level of simplicity; if we are to take Lukács’ claim seriously we must compare the content of each passage in order to understand why Lukács brings them into proximal relation with one another. If this section of Hegel is taken to contain the entirety of his philosophy, it is because it demonstrates the movement of the dialectic in its purest form. Dialectical development is not merely a way of presenting material—the dynamism that is central to dialectical thinking is built into the basic nature of reality itself. Dialectically conceived, concepts such as Being, nothingness, immediacy etc., are not just used to organise material, but are real structures and forces. For Hegel, ‘Pure Being’ and ‘Pure Nothingness’ in their ‘indeterminate immediacy,’ are shown to be equal to one another (*Logic* §132 ,133). “Their truth is therefore, this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: *becoming*, a movement in which both are distinguished, but by a difference which has equally immediately resolved itself” (*Logic*

§ 134). It is thus the movement of *becoming* in Hegel's philosophy that makes knowledge a *process* and reveals that concepts are subject to *appearances* which are always *mediated*. This same dialectical process is of course expanded in innumerable ways throughout Hegel's work, but one can reasonably assert that this section can be read as a structural microcosm for his entire system, and that the 'revolutionary' element of the system is its focus on the historical dynamism of thought.

The first chapter in *Capital* on the commodity plays an analogous role in Marx's philosophical system. Marx's analysis of capitalist exchange reveals that there is a paradox at the center of the commodity structure. Seen as material goods (use-values) commodities are fundamentally different from one another and yet, in spite of their uniqueness, they are somehow able to find equal expression of *value* when brought into relation with other commodities on the market. How is it possible that a commodity like a cellphone can be expressed in terms of the same valuation (money form) of something as different as a haircut? As if lost in circularity, it appears as if it is by virtue of their *exchangeability* that commodities can be exchanged at all. The universal element that Marx locates in every commodity is the element of *abstract* human labour that goes into its creation. In this respect, the determinate nature of every commodity is due to an element of human labour congealed in the commodity itself. Or, in other words, material can only *become* a commodity through a set of social relationships that arise from the fact that labour is itself a commodity. For Marx, it is abstract labor, expressed as 'socially necessary labor time,' that generates value. Whereas the use-value of a commodity, that is what a commodity actually is, is a function of *concrete* labor, while its value is a function of *abstract* labor. It is precisely this shared aspect of *movement* or *process* that lies

behind the *appearance* of reality which constitutes the core of both Hegel's dialectical theory and Marx's historical materialism.

Lukács had another substantial reason for comparing these two particular chapters. To be sure both chapters occupy a central spot in the respective thinkers' systems of thought, in addition to highlighting a conceptual theme common to them both. However, by comparing these two particular chapters Lukács is also bringing a point of tension to the forefront. This being the point of demarcation between Hegelian idealism and Marxian materialism; the transition from *sublation* to *praxis*. For Marx,

[Hegel] has a genuine understanding of work as the process by which man creates himself, but he has no insight into the negative aspects of work in capitalist society since he only considers its positive side...since he does not see the negative aspects of work, he becomes guilty of false distinctions and false syntheses, of the mystifications of idealism (Lukács 1975, 550).

While Marx praises Hegel for "grasping labour as the *essence* of man," he derides him insofar as "the only labour which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental* labour"(Marx 1972, 90). For Hegel, objectivity itself is a form of *estrangement* and the purpose of self-consciousness is to apprehend the estranged essence of the object and incorporate it into itself in the form of absolute knowledge. The process of sublation is such that, through abstract mental labour, self-consciousness is able to negate the mediated appearance of objects while grasping the immediacy of their objective essence. Marx's notion of praxis replaces Hegelian self-consciousness with a sensuous human being. For Marx, "to be sensuous is to suffer...man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a *suffering* being and because he feels what he suffers, a *passionate* being" (Marx 1972, 94). The transition from an idealist dialectics, which uses sublation as a method in the process of attaining absolute knowledge, to a materialist dialectics which

relies on a concept of praxis, thus amounts to the difference between *understanding* the world and *shaping* the world. Praxis, for Marx, involves focusing on the way in which human beings produce their social world under conditions of class struggle, economic competition and social contradiction. Whereas Hegel understands the progression of consciousness throughout history as occurring over and above material circumstances, Marx shows how material circumstances shape and impede the progression of both society and consciousness.

What we are looking for in Marx's chapter on the commodity is thus the outline of a theory of historical materialism that explains the interrelatedness of human beings in terms of economic exchange. Marx begins his investigation in the first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* with an examination of commodities since "the individual commodity *appears* as its [capitalist modes of production] elementary form" (Marx 125). From the outset we should note that there are already two factors which immediately link Marx's discussion to the tradition of German idealism. While Marx's *critique* of political economy recalls Kant's famous epistemological critiques, it simultaneously constitutes a sublation of this entire philosophical tradition in German philosophy. Rather than dealing with philosophical abstraction, Marx's work is attempting to examine concrete social conditions. Hence, Marx's oft quoted line from the *Theses on Feuerbach* that "the philosophers hitherto have only interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it" (Marx 1975,109). Far from providing a *criticism* of capitalism in a philosophical sense, Marx is undertaking an examination of the fundamental laws governing the dynamics of capitalist production, which is why he refers to his work as a 'science' rather than philosophy. By engaging with 'political

economy', i.e. the study of supply and demand in capitalist exchange, Marx's enquiry is firmly fixated on the internal structure of capitalist production and seeks to analyse capitalism on its own terms.

The second factor that immediately draws our attention to the influence of German idealism on Marx's thought, is the emphasis on the word *appearance* in the first sentence of *Capital*. It occurs twice: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails *appears* as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity *appears* as its elementary form" (Marx 125). In Hegelian terms, the dichotomy we are dealing with is that of *appearance* versus *essence* which, in the context of this sentence, suggests that Marx is attempting to draw our attention to a process that is taking place beneath the surface level. If the 'immense collection of commodities' only amounts to the *appearance* of wealth in capitalist societies, the real source or 'essence' of this wealth must in actuality be some other factor. It is precisely this other factor—human labour—that Marx's analysis reveals to be the essential content behind the elementary *form* of the commodity in capitalist production.

Lukács' interest in this chapter has to do with the mysterious relation between use-value, exchange-value and value congealed in the commodity. The underlying forces that make this synthesis possible give commodities the appearance of being valuable *in-themselves*, or as Marx describes it, it is what gives commodities a 'phantom objectivity.' According to Marx, "the commodity is first of all an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind" (Marx 125). The use-value of a commodity "is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the later," they constitute "the material content of wealth,"

and “are only realized in use or in consumption”(Marx 126). When we move from the discussion of use-value to exchange-value, the mystery appears.

In order to understand this mystery, we have to examine a fundamental feature of Marx’s methodology: in order to isolate an individual aspect of the exchange process, in this case use-value, he holds all other aspects equal. Thus when dealing with the qualitative side of the commodity he holds that quantity is constant. Following the dictates of bourgeois political economy, exchange-value appears to be a quantitative relation describing the exchange of one use-value for another. But as Marx notes, “this relation changes constantly with time and place. Hence exchange-value appears to be something accidental and purely relative” (Marx 126). Delving further, Marx argues that exchange-value comes to represent a commensurable, necessarily equal magnitude between commodities that are fundamentally different in their material constitution i.e. use-value. A bottle of wine and a pair of shoes could both cost one hundred dollars, but although their exchange value (as represented by the money form) is identical, the products themselves are not.

The difficulty is that each specific commodity will have a different exchange-value depending on what type of good it is exchanged for. Thus, Marx discovers that there must be some element common to all commodities that allows them to enter into an exchange with any other commodity, irrespective of their material constitution. “This common element cannot be a geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities” insofar as “the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values” (Marx 127). If we take away all of the sensuous determinacy of the commodity, the only element that remains common to *every*

commodity is that they are the products of a determinate amount of labour time. (Marx 128). Bereft of any sensuous qualities, we cannot even be specific about the specific variety of concrete labour that shapes a commodity, but must speak of human labour in the abstract. These observations culminate in one of the most important paragraphs in all of Marx's work:

Let us now look at the *residue* of the products of labour. There is nothing left of them in each case but the same *phantom-like objectivity*; they are merely *congealed* quantities of homogenous human labour, i.e. of human labour expended without regard to the *form* of its expenditure. All these things now tell us is that human labour-power has been expended to produce them, human labour power is *accumulated* in them. As crystals of this *social substance*, which is common to them all, they are values—commodity values... A use-value, or useful article, therefore, has value only because *abstract* human labour is *objectified* or *materialized* in it. (Marx 128-129). [Italics added]

I have chosen to reproduce this paragraph in its entirety because it requires extensive commentary in order to establish a thorough understanding of the relationship between the fetish character of the commodity and reification.

The two most significant concepts articulated by Marx in the above passage are 'social substance' and 'phantom objectivity.' The idea of 'social substance' is perhaps the most significant aspect of this passage for Lukács' later development of reification. Social relations are given substance because they are *objectified* in commodities. For Marx, the socially necessary labor time which is used to create a given product generates value. While the amount of socially necessary labor time that goes into a product can be measured objectively, it is nevertheless socially mediated. On the one hand, there is an objective relation between the amount of labor time needed to produce a given commodity and the concrete, material conditions of production in a particular society. On

the other hand, the type of labor to be performed, which commodities should be produced, and of course labor itself as an activity, are all dependent on social relations.

The ‘phantom objectivity’ that Marx attributes to commodities speaks to an inverted relationship between the value of a commodity and labor expended to produce it. A commodity has value *because* socially necessary labor time was expended for its creation, but this does not mean that the creation of said commodity was itself necessary. Which commodities are produced, valued, and consumed *should* be subject to the needs and desires of individuals. But since labor itself becomes a commodity under capitalism, and individuals are forced to sell their labor time, commodities are produced according to the dictates of capital irrespective of the needs of society. Consequently, the majority of commodities are only valuable within a capitalist paradigm and bear little to no use-value in any meaningful life-affirming sense. While diamond rings, for example, are extremely expensive they do not do anything to sustain or promote life. The desire for diamond rings is rooted in a social system which grants them an inordinate amount of symbolic value with respect to its cultural practices: as symbols of engagement, marriage, an expression of wealth and so on. The ‘phantom objectivity’ associated with a diamond ring amounts to mistaking this socially determined value as something objectively inherent in the ring itself. Applied more generally, the ‘fetish’ character of the commodity is the belief that commodities are valuable *in themselves*, divorced from the particular social formations and practices which generate their value.

Marx reveals that the transition from ‘abstract labour’—i.e. socially necessary labor time— to objective value occurs through the act of labouring, i.e. *praxis*. But-- and this point is crucial-- this does not suggest that the objective value materialized in a

commodity is any less abstract. If we recall Lukács' comparison between Hegel's chapter on Being, Non-Being, and Becoming we can more clearly see why Marx's chapter on the commodity is analogous insofar as he describes the movement of abstract labor to concrete value through labour time. However, we can see the key distinction between Hegel's idealist dialectics and Marx's materialist version if we draw our attention to the sentence where Marx writes that "human labour [under capitalism] is expended without regard to the form of its expenditure." It is this observation that differentiates materialist and idealist dialectics. In Hegel sensuous reality is a reflexive concept, that is, it allows self-consciousness to expand its knowledge by differentiating itself from mediated objects. Marx's innovation was to show that material reality *pushes back*; material reality is fundamentally *social* and thus the product of human labor. For Marx, overcoming alienation does not follow the path of knowledge, as in Hegel, but rather follows the path of social change.

Marx teaches us that there is objective value in the form in which abstract labour is materialized. The key distinction, for Marx, is whether or not the materialization of a given product was determined by free labor power or commodified labor power. Labor which is expended for the sake of satisfying fundamental life requirements is *qualitatively different* from labor which serves capital, the latter having been purchased as labor time and subsequently expended for the production of *surplus* value. Marx is attempting to show in the chapter on commodities that the laws of commodity exchange represent objective *social* relations rather than objective *natural* relations. While these relations are discoverable upon reflection, "reflection begins *post festum*" and consequently "the preliminary requirements for the circulation of commodities already

possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account of their content and meaning” (Marx 168). Because exchange relations have already been established by the time we attempt to understand them, “the labour time socially necessary to produce commodities asserts itself as a regulative law of nature. The same way the law of gravity asserts itself when a person’s house collapses on top of him” (Marx 168). As David Harvey notes, “this parallel between gravity and value is interesting: both are relations and not things, and both have to be conceptualized as immaterial but objective” (Harvey 43).

My purpose in engaging in this extended exposition of Marx’s chapter on the commodity is to be able to assert the following claim about commodity fetishism, and by extension reification. Both commodity fetishism and reification arise in social contexts where human labour is commodified and people’s lives depend upon earning wages through which they buy back the products of their own labour. Competitive pressures and not human need determine whether there will be labour, what wage rates will be, and how much necessities cost. The results of praxis (i.e. concrete labor) thus *appear* as independent natural forces. Marx describes fetishism as “the definite social relation between men that assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 165). For the purposes of discussing the relationship between reification and fetishism, the juxtaposition between fetishism and praxis is instructive insofar as it allows us to define reification as the consequence of the primacy of exchange value over use-value. In other words, fetishism is the result of conceiving of the value-form under capitalism as a *natural* relation. Social relations suffer to the precise degree that they are not recognized as such insofar as labour power is directed towards the *un-natural*

demands of the market instead of natural human needs. For Marx, “this is what the bourgeois political economists have done: they have treated value as a fact of nature, not a social construction arising out of a particular mode of production” (Harvey 46). The tendency to treat social relations as natural relations ultimately affects modes of thought as well, which merely reflect “the fetish of their times” (Harvey 45).

Reification in Exchange

Lukács’ theory of reification is best understood as an extension of the statement above: reification is an explanation of how fetishism has dominated the thought and life-horizons of contemporary individuals. This applies both to how individuals understand themselves in addition to how they relate to the world around them. There is thus an objective and subjective side to the phenomenon of reification. According to Lukács, the objective aspect has to do with the world of commodities and their movement in the market (Lukács 87). “*Objectively* a world of objects and relations between things springs into being. The laws governing these objects...confront man as invisible forces that generate their own power” (Lukács 87). The subjective side of reification results from the commodification of labour power—in order to survive individuals must treat their own labour as a commodity. Consequently, “man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society” (Lukács 87). Thus, the problems growing out of the fetish character of the commodity takes on an “objective form,” and individuals take up “a subjective stance corresponding to it” (Lukács 84).

For Lukács, there is an abstract principle which combines the objective and subjective aspects of reification, “the principle of rationalisation based on what is and *can*

be calculated” (Lukács 88). From this principle Lukács is able to derive two chief changes that occur to the subject and object of the economic process. The first of these changes has to do with “the mathematical analysis of work-processes” (Lukács 88). In contradistinction to early forms of production where work processes were organic, spontaneous and qualitatively determined, the mechanisation of contemporary forms of labour promotes uniformity in production. Workers in earlier epochs generally specialised in a specific craft and were able to acquire a certain skill for their trade that was unique to their own abilities. With the advent of the scientific division of labour, the individual attributes of skilled workers were replaced with mechanical precision, repetition and commensurability. As Lukács puts it, rationalisation allows for the precise prediction of “all the results to be achieved in production” which is accomplished through “the exact breakdown of every complex into its elements and the study of special laws governing production” (Lukács 88).²

Predictability in production serves to eliminate any aspect of spontaneity that was formerly enjoyed by the worker in the labour process. But crucially this rationalisation also diminishes, perhaps to the point of annihilation, any aesthetic value in the product of labour. The particularity of a commodity in pre-capitalist modes of organization was the result of the unique capabilities of the individual hands that gave form to the material—for better or worse. Furthermore, whether it was an individual or a group of people, whenever there is consistent oversight of the creation of a product from start to finish there is a certain organic *unity* embedded in the object. Generally speaking this suggests that no two products are identical, and allows for a certain reflexivity in the process of

² This process of rationalisation is masterfully examined in Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*.

production whereby workers adapt their techniques based on experiences and available resources. Additionally, whenever there is a unified work process, the valuation of the end result is a question of *quality* rather than *quantity*.

The second change wrought by the principle of rationalisation is the *fragmentation* of the object of production. Instead of an individual worker laboring over a given product from start to finish, production is broken down into infinitesimal, discrete processes. In factories workers on the assembly line perform one or several repetitive tasks, which represents only a moment in the entire process. While Lukács is thinking specifically of the scientific division of labour, he draws an interesting conclusion that penetrates into the depths of modern subjectivity. For Lukács, “the fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject” (Lukács 89). Here Lukács is emphasizing a dialectical relation between the worker and the objects the worker is producing. Significantly this dialectical relationship has less to do with the way that the worker apprehends the product of their labour, but is rather an expression of the way in which the worker engages in the *process* of production. While it is true that the ownership of private property relates directly to the workers’ capacity of self-determination, it is the form that this determination ultimately takes—i.e. the expression of human activity—that shapes the consciousness of the worker. Under capitalism, production is socially organized and dominated by market forces that are not the product of anyone’s will or consciousness.

In this respect, individuals that suffered under earlier forms of economic organization, while experiencing less formal freedom and worse standards of living, can be said to experience lesser degrees of reification. Take feudalism for example: while

serfs knew that they owed some of the product of their labour to feudal lords, the church, etc. they nevertheless enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy when it came to the process of their work. Certainly they did not own all of the products of their labour, they did own that which was left after they paid their tithes and taxes. The greater degree of spontaneity in the labour process was a result of being organically connected to the means of production, which, in this case, was the land. This allowed workers to recognize the reflection of their own activity in the form of whatever they produced.

The reciprocal relationship between spontaneity and labour is such that, under a rationalised work-process “the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error* when contrasted with abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions” (Lukács 89). It is here that the objective aspects of reification converge with the subjective side and begin to distort the consciousness and personality of the worker. As Jean Grondin astutely notes, “Lukács’ most penetrating analyses...are devoted to subjective reification...the alienation of the worker in regard to the reified substance of his work follows in the wake of a decomposition of his subjectivity” (Grondin 90). Grondin’s use of ‘decomposition’ with regard to the subjectivity of the worker is striking, in that it illustrates nicely the intrinsic relationship between the organic ‘composition’ of subjectivity and work-processes carried out under non-reifying conditions. There is an implicit emphasis on the lack of spontaneity experienced by the worker under capitalism as it relates to Lukács’ comments on the fragmentation of the subject. As the object of production, i.e. work-processes, become increasingly fragmented, the actions of individual workers are divided up into similarly fragmented tasks that they must execute. As labour becomes increasingly

rationalised the activity of the worker “becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*” (Lukács 89).

A better translation of what Lukács is attempting to articulate with the use of the term ‘contemplative’ labour may be ‘passivity.’ To see why this is the case it is necessary to unpack Marx’s notion of what labour entails. For Marx, “labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Marx 283). Through her actions, the worker affects external nature and changes it in order to suit her needs, which simultaneously changes the ‘nature’ of the worker herself who discovers something about their own powers by engaging in this process (Marx 283). What distinguishes the “exclusively human characteristic” of labour from the exclusively instinctive variety of animals, is that human labour “conceives of an ideal result” *prior* to the labour process. Thus, “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax” (Marx 284). In this respect there is a contemplative element involved at the outset of the labour process, which is quite different from what Lukács has in mind. When Lukács uses ‘contemplative’ he is attempting to emphasize the degree to which reified labour is effectively removed from the end product of its work. Under capitalism, workers no longer envision a product that they subsequently labour to create through their own activity, but rather are forced to act as part of a process wherein the end product is always predetermined. In an automated factory, the worker does not really create anything in the sense of shaping material in accordance with their own ideas. They are instead forced to

‘watch on’ as the process of production takes place around them while they are forced to perform the same repetitive task demanded of them by the organization of the factory.

This new sense of ‘contemplative’ activity represents a dialectical inversion of the simple elements of the labour process. Marx outlines three elements of the labour process: “1) purposeful activity, i.e. work itself, 2) the object on which that work is performed, and 3) the instruments of that work” (Marx 284). Recall Lukács’ earlier emphasis that “rationalisation is based on what is and can be calculated.” In pre-capitalist forms of organization, the second two elements of the labour process enumerated by Marx would follow from the first, that is, purposeful activity. Under capitalism, however, the rationalisation of the work process allows the latter two elements to be subjected to precise calculation, which subsumes the concern for quality of work under the demand for quantitative efficiency. Consequently, the instruments of labour and the objects on which work is performed end up determining the nature of the work itself, and are in turn determined by (global) market forces. I will come back to this point in the second section of this paper when I turn to Postone. According to Marx, under natural labour processes, “man not only affects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials” (Marx 284). It follows that, under reified work-processes, individuals see their own purpose in a distorted form: either as lacking purposiveness or as determined *by* material forces.

Lukács articulates the dialectical relation between the *objective form* of reification and the *subjective stance* engendered by reification. Thus, any interpretation which treats reification as a purely subjective stance not only deprives it of its material substance but

also undermines potential discussion of overcoming reification. Lukács is explicit on this account:

These manifestations [of reified relations] are by no means merely modes of thought, they are the forms in which contemporary bourgeois society is objectified. Their abolition, if it is to be a true abolition, cannot simply be the result of thought alone, it must also amount to their *practical* abolition as the *actual forms of social life*. (Lukács 177)

The primacy of the objective aspect of reification has to do with the transformation of *quality* into *quantity*, or, what amounts to the same thing in the labour process, the reduction of *time* into *space*. For Lukács,

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 (Lukács 89).

Lukács' claim that the contemplative stance 'degrades time to the dimension of space,' dually refers to the commodification of labor power and the fragmentation of the object of production. Time becomes space insofar as it must be 'filled'; the scientific organization of factories is intended to maximize productivity. In order to create as much surplus value as possible, each movement of the worker must be intentional and efficient. In an automated factory the work day is broken down into the amount of times a worker is able to perform a particular task at their station. On the assembly line, the average time that it takes to satisfy the requirements at a particular station is translated into the distance between widgets on the line and the speed at which the line moves, and hence time becomes space. The assembly line is simply the most direct expression of this phenomena but it holds true for all labor under capitalism. The key element in this claim is that time is measured in relation to space, which is to say that time is treated *quantitatively* instead

of *qualitatively*. We will return to this theme and examine it more rigorously in the second section of this paper.

We must pay close attention to the claim that “a closed system transforms the basic categories of man’s attitude to the world.” This points to a dialectical process whereby objective forces (exchange relations) not only changes the subjective attitude of individuals in their experience of the world, but also changes the very categories through which they apprehend the world objectively. If we think of the use of ‘categories’ here in the sense of Kant’s categories of the understanding, a different conception of the interplay of objective and subjective reification emerges. Kant’s categories of the understanding are abstract *a priori* principles inherent to *subjective consciousness*, but they nevertheless ground the possibility of *objective* knowledge. In a similar sense, to the extent that rationalisation distorts “the basic categories of man’s immediate attitude to the world,” we are not merely dealing with a *subjective stance* but also, and more importantly, we are dealing with the way that individuals apprehend the world *objectively*.

This peculiar connection between the subjective and objective aspects of reification motivates Lukács’ discussion of ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois thought.’ “Modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness” because the material tendency towards a totalizing system has been reflected in abstract thought that likewise seeks to reduce the manifold of experience to a singular system (Lukács 110). Commodity relations, “stamp their imprint upon the whole consciousness of man: his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world”

(Lukács 100). As a result, “the subject of exchange is just as abstract, formal and reified as its object” (Lukács 105) to the extent that the will, actions and consciousness of sensuous individuals are seen as adhering to the same mechanical laws as inert objects. Here we have a sort of inversion of the ‘phantom objectivity’ of commodity fetishism; to the same degree that commodities are taken to embody abstract universal value, *embodied* individuals are treated as merely contingent elements of a greater system valuable only insofar as they can contribute to the production of commodities.

Reification in Thought

In the second section of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács undertakes an examination of the ways in which ‘modern philosophy’ is an expression of reification on the level of thought. While the objective side of reification occurs as a result of the fragmentation of the object of production in addition to the commodification of labor, reification of thought is an expression of the ways in which prevailing social conditions have affected consciousness. Or, as Lukács expresses it at the beginning of the section on ‘the antinomies of bourgeois thought,’ “modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness”(Lukács 110). What demarcates ‘modern’ philosophy from previous forms of thought, for Lukács, is that modern philosophy “refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product” (Lukács 111). Much like individuals are divorced from their fundamental life-ground (nature) and self-realization due to the commodification of labor, abstract thought reflects the same fate under these circumstances. The tension between individual and society seeps into modern philosophy and, instead of trying to bridge the gap, bourgeois thought effectively ends up justifying

the status quo. In a certain respect, the ‘phantom objectivity’ of commodities compels modern philosophy to come up with a ‘phantom subjectivity’—that is, an abstract, liberal notion of a free subject is created to compensate for the impotence of actually existing individuals under oppressive society. In a social state of objective unfreedom, reified consciousness attempts to re-create freedom in the realm of abstract thought.

Consequently, for Lukács, “the entanglements and equivocations hidden in [modern philosophy’s] concepts of subject and object...is nothing but the logical and systematic formulation of the modern state of society” (Lukács 128). Lukács’ aim here is not to reduce philosophical developments to an emergent property of socio-historical developments, but rather to demonstrate that the problems of philosophy are necessarily shaped by the contemporary state of society. Prevalent among this phenomenon is the fact that “the attempt to universalise rationalism” creates “the demand for a system” (Lukács 116). Modern philosophy, which strives towards systematic thought, is inevitably influenced by the totalizing tendencies of capitalist production, and both tend to reduce society and nature to a single organizing principle. Whereas capitalist production dominates both society and nature for the creation of surplus value, modern philosophy conceives of society and nature relative to the epistemic structures of the thinking subject.

For Lukács there is thus a ‘double tendency’ which characterizes the thought of bourgeois society.

On the one hand it acquires increasing control over the details of its social existence, subjecting them to its needs. On the other hand it loses the possibility of gaining intellectual control of society as a whole and with that it loses its own qualifications of leadership (Lukács 121).

‘Classical German philosophy’ represents the fullest realization this development, according to Lukács, insofar as it “raises these problems to the level of consciousness” (Lukács 121). Lukács goes on to make the remarkable claim that classical German philosophy “is able—in thought—to complete the evolution of class” (Lukács 121). Having raised the problems of bourgeois society to the level of consciousness, classical German philosophy is able to think them through “to the very end on the plane of philosophy” (Lukács 121). The drawback, however, is that the discussion of these problems, as well as any proposed solutions, remain caught in the realm of abstract thought and thus, “the concrete problems of society and the concrete solutions cannot be seen” (Lukács 121). Nevertheless, the necessity of going beyond this particular historical stage in the development of humanity is grasped for the first time, even if only in thought. The purpose of Lukács’ discussion in the section on ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’ is to demonstrate that while the tradition of ‘classical German philosophy’ tends towards understanding the concrete problems of society (rather than merely epistemological or metaphysical questions) its rationalisation nevertheless prevents it from seeing the need for social solutions.

It is precisely these concrete problems we will now turn to in the second half of this paper in an attempt to establish the contemporary relevance of the concept of reification.

Reification Under Late Capitalism

The second section of this paper will focus on an assessment of the contemporary relevance of Lukács’ concept of reification given the reality of capitalist society in the twenty-first century. In an effort to bring key themes from Lukács’ discussion of

reification into dialogue with modern social political thought, we will examine Moishe Postone's *Time, labor and social domination* in addition to Jeff Noonan's article *Free time as a necessary condition of free life*. Postone's work attempts to provide a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory; I will contend that Postone's work not only belongs to the same tradition as Lukács' Marxian analysis but further that it is able to correct some of the more idealist tendencies in Lukács' work. Noonan's work nicely explicates the political implications of the reifying effects of capitalism on free time and demonstrates the relationship between time and life value. Considerably more time will be devoted to Postone, as it pertains more to the conceptual specificities of Lukács' position. Noonan's work is will be used to facilitate a transition to the end of the paper as it re-introduces the political impetus of reification that is largely lacking from Postone's work. Noonan's work is thus well suited as a segue into the concluding remarks of the paper which demand commentary on the contemporary social-political relevance of the reification.

Postone and the Legacy of Lukács

Writing some seventy years after Lukács first published *History and Class Consciousness*³ Postone undertakes a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory, relying heavily on Marx's work in the *Grundrisse* to supplement his work in *Capital*. In the secondary literature on Lukács, commentators frequently note how prescient *History and Class Consciousness* appears when compared to Marx's work in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Lukács' theory of reification seems to anticipate Marx's comments on alienation presented in the *1844 Manuscripts*, but the manuscripts— along with the *Grundrisse* and

³ *History and Class Consciousness* was first published in 1927. *Time, labour and social domination* was published in 1993.

other unpublished writings—were not discovered until 1939, twelve years after the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*. I hope to show that, by having access to key works of Marx which were unavailable to Lukács, in addition to the ability to read Lukács work, Postone was able to make theoretical connections with respect to Marx's work that escaped Lukács.

For his part, Postone is clear that Lukács was a major influence for his work noting in the introduction to *Time, labor and social domination* that:

This reinterpretation both has been influenced by and is intended as a critique of, the approaches developed by Georg Lukács (especially in *History and Class Consciousness*) and members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (Postone 15).

While many commentators fret over the relationship between Lukács and the Frankfurt School, Postone places himself firmly in this tradition because of their specific contribution to the methodological approach to Marxian analysis. For Postone this contribution is twofold; on the one hand, rather than thinking of Marx's work as a theory of production and class structure this tradition understands Marx's thought as "a theory of the constitution of determinate, reified forms of social objectivity and subjectivity...an attempt to analyze critically the cultural forms and social structures of capitalist civilization" (Postone 16). On the other hand, "Marx's theory is thought to grasp the relationship of theory to society self-reflexively, by seeking to analyze its context in a way that locates itself historically and accounts for the possibility of its own standpoint" (Postone 16).

Postone wants to "appropriate the critical thrust of this interpretive tradition" while arguing for a new interpretation of Marx's analysis of labor (Postone 16). This new

interpretation of the significance of Marx's analysis of labor consists in the critique of what Postone calls the 'transhistorical conception of labor' and constitutes the overarching argument of *Time, labor and social domination*. Lukács' and the Frankfurt School unwittingly adopt a 'transhistorical conception of labour', which according to Postone, prevents them from "developing a conception of capitalism adequate to the twentieth century" (Postone 16). Furthermore, according to Postone, due to this conception of labor Lukács advocates for a 'transhistorical dialectic grounded ontologically in social Being' (Postone 140).

Since Postone's work is historically later than Lukács', it is easy to establish the above connection but it is also interesting to note that there is a sense in which Lukács seems to anticipate Postone's work. In the 'preface to the new edition' of *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1967, Lukács reflects on the 'mistakes' he made in that work. The fundamental mistake Lukács acknowledges amounts to him being 'too much of an idealist' and succumbing to 'messianic utopianism.' Lukács applied the 'logico-metaphysical construction of the *Phenomenology of Mind*' to the existence and consciousness of the proletariat all too readily, which resulted in an image of the proletariat as "the identical subject-object" that in truth was "nothing more than a purely metaphysical construct" (Lukács xxiii). For Lukács, the "fundamental and crude error" of *History and Class Consciousness* was that, following Hegel, it "equates alienation with objectification" (Lukács xxiv). However, Lukács writes that he later came to realize that "objectification is a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated from human life in society" (Lukács xxiv). The problem with this view is that if *all* objectification is alienation the only refuge from this state is on the level of consciousness, which is why Lukács states

that the identical subject-object conceived in terms of self-knowledge is a metaphysical construct.

Lukacs' self-critique of his treatment of objectification in *History and Class Consciousness* brings him closest to Postone's arguments about labor. Attempting to correct his comments on objectification Lukács writes that,

Only when the objectified forms in society acquire functions that bring the essence of man into conflict with his existence, only when man's nature is subjugated, deformed and crippled can we speak of an objective societal condition of alienation and, as an inexorable consequence, of all the subjective marks of an internal alienation. This duality was not acknowledged in *History and Class Consciousness*. And this is why it is so wide of the mark in its basic view of the history of philosophy (Lukács xxiv).

Lukács comes close to this idea of objectification with his concept of reification, but does not quite succeed in situating objective societal conditions of alienation historically. For example, Lukács does argue that we only see reification in its fullest extent once the commodity has become the universal form of exchange. Further, as we saw above, there are both *subjective* and *objective* aspects of reification which are related to the work *process*. Finally, and most importantly, as we have also seen Lukács notes that reification involves 'reducing time to space.' Postone focuses specifically on this idea that, under capitalism, *time is reduced to space* and devotes the key chapters of his work to this problematic. Postone's arguments in these chapters, entitled 'Abstract labor' and 'Abstract time' respectively, will be dealt with extensively as they explicate the key components of his reinterpretation of Marx's work. By arguing that "the meaning of the category of labor in Marx's mature works...is historically specific rather than transhistorical," Postone is able to discover how and when 'objectified forms in society' became distorted in the respect Lukács alludes to above (Postone 4).

Against a Transhistorical Account of Labor

In *Time, labor and social domination*, Postone “hopes to lay the foundation for a different, more powerful critical analysis of the capitalist social formation...adequate to the late twentieth century” (Postone 3). For Postone, the requisite concepts for such an analysis “should grasp the essential character and historical developments of modern society” in addition to “overcoming the familiar theoretical dichotomies of structure and action, meaning and material life” (Postone 3). In order to develop such an understanding, Postone strives to “separate conceptually...the fundamental core of capitalism from its nineteenth-century forms” (Postone 3). Rather than analyzing capitalism along the lines of orthodox Marxism—i.e. in terms of private property, means of production, the market, and class struggle—Postone “conceptualizes capitalism in terms of a *historically specific* form of social interdependence with an *impersonal* and *seemingly objective* character”⁴ (Postone 3).

By describing capitalism as a form of social interdependence which takes on an ‘impersonal’ and ‘seemingly objective’ character, Postone is appropriating the language of Lukács’ description of reification and placing it at the core of his analysis. Recall that for Lukács, reification has to do with the process by which “a world of objects and relations between things” create laws which “confront man as invisible forces that generate their own power” (Lukács 87). Postone intends to utilize this language so as to interpret Marx’s critical theory in such a way that “leads to a critique of the industrial process of production” (Postone 6). According to Postone, the ‘crisis of traditional Marxism’ results from the fact that “as a *theory* of production, traditional Marxism does

⁴ My emphasis.

not entail a *critique* of production” (Postone 9). Postone argues that traditional Marxism focuses too much on relations of distribution to the extent that, “its interpretation of the trajectory of capitalist development clearly expresses an affirmative attitude towards industrial production” (Postone 9). On Postone’s reading, traditional Marxism treats capitalism as “a set of extrinsic factors impinging on the process of production” (Postone 9). Since socialism “is seen as a new mode of politically administering and economically regulating the *same* industrial mode of production” traditional Marxism entails a *theory* of production and a *critique* of distribution. What Postone sets out to explicate with his ‘historically specific’ interpretation of labour is a critique of industrial production itself.

Postone describes social relations under capitalism as an “abstract form of social domination—one that subjects people to impersonal structural imperatives and constraints that cannot be adequately grasped in terms of concrete domination (Postone 4). Consequently, Postone treats Marx’s theory of capitalism “less as a theory of forms of exploitation and domination *within* society, and more as a critical social theory of the nature of modernity itself” (Postone 4). Postone understands the ‘nature of modernity’ in terms of ‘historically specific social forms’ that bear the features of capitalist society. In particular he indicates that, given Marx’s analysis of the fundamental structure of capitalism, ‘the commodity’ and ‘capital’ “provide an excellent point of departure for an attempt to ground *socially* the systemic characteristics of modernity” (Postone 4). Interestingly, Postone preempts potential orthodox Marxist criticisms of his reinterpretation by noting at the outset that his work takes a ‘nonrevolutionary approach’ (Postone 4). By this he means that he is less concerned with the traditional Marxist focus

on the history of class struggle, property ownership, technological progress⁵ and revolutionary politics. While any nonrevolutionary approach to Marxism would be considered ‘revisionist’ from the perspective of early twentieth-century Marxism, Postone argues that his shift in focus avoids many of the theoretical pitfalls germane to traditional Marxism. Such historical developments as the welfare-state, relative advances in the living conditions of the working class in developed countries, and the non-realization of revolutionary movements which Marx thought were inevitable seem to cast doubt on the veracity of the Marxian approach. What Postone is attempting to accomplish with his nonrevolutionary approach is thus an elucidation of Marx’s central theoretical concepts which allow for a categorial analysis of capitalism as it appears in the twenty-first century.

Postone’s fundamental contention is that “in Marx’s mature critique, the notion that labor constitutes the social world and is the source of all wealth does not refer to society in general, but to capitalist, or modern society alone”(Postone 4). Postone claims that the traditional interpretation of Marx’s critique of political economy understands labor as a ‘transhistorical’ phenomenon. Postone wants to show that Marx’s analysis of labor is ‘historically specific’ to the role that labor plays *in* capitalism. At the outset this sounds like an absurd claim—even those that know little more than the name of Marx are aware that Marx was a great critic of capitalism and given this ubiquitous understanding it seems trivial to state that Marx is talking about labor in capitalism. However, much like Marx had to develop his entire theoretical critique of capitalism in order to go back and start with the commodity at the beginning of *Capital*, Postone begins with the distinction

⁵ Postone is not concerned with industrial production understood as linear progress or as the necessary grounds for communist revolution. He does however recognize the importance of industrial production insofar as it shapes the way that labor is performed under capitalism.

between ‘transhistorical’ and ‘historically specific’ labor only *after* having located its importance by way of a nuanced theoretical interpretation. The fascinating claim that Postone is making is that there are “two fundamentally different modes of critical analysis” in Marx (Postone 5). On the one hand, Marx presents “a critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of* labor” and on the other “a critique *of* labor in capitalism” (Postone 5). In the first place, labor is understood in the transhistorical sense and is used to describe tensions that exist between the structures of capitalist society and the social sphere constituted by labor. It is here, for example, that discussions of the market and private property come into the fold. To this extent labor, in both the transhistorical and alienated sense, forms the *basis* or *standpoint* from which Marx’s critique of capitalism is undertaken. According to the second mode of analysis “labor is the *object* of the critique of capitalist society” in that it is “historically specific and constitutes the essential structures of that society” (Postone 6).

With his twofold interpretation of Marx’s analysis we can more clearly the influence Lukács exerted on Postone. Lukács expanded on Marx’s work by unpacking further dialectical implications from the theory of historical materialism: reification is both *subjective* and *objective* and class consciousness demands that the proletariat recognizes itself as both the *subject* and *object* of history. Similarly, Postone is arguing that labor is both the *subject* and *object* of Marx’s analysis. Rather than simply rejecting transhistorical accounts of labor, Postone is attempting to demonstrate that this conception of labor is only one side of a dialectical account. Without a theoretical account of the transhistorical nature of labor it would be all but impossible to identify the distorted form of labor under capitalism. However, without understanding the historically

specific role of labor in capitalist society—i.e. the objective form of labor in capitalism—it is impossible to identify the objective forces responsible for said distortion.

The second level of Marxian analysis proposed by Postone has major consequences for traditional interpretations that understand Marxism exclusively from the perspective of the first level of analysis. According to Postone, transhistorical conceptions of labor understand labor as “a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating specific products in order to satisfy determinate human needs” (Postone 7). The problem with labor under capitalism, in this view, is not the nature of the labor itself but rather the way that the products of labor are distributed. Such critiques that focus on the modes of distribution in capitalism, tend to view industrial production as a positive development insofar as increased productivity is seen as the necessary ground for the abolition of capitalism. Against this view, Postone argues that “as a *theory* of production Marxism does not entail a *critique* of production” (Postone 9). Indeed, Postone’s intent is to problematize the traditional understanding of the “basic contradiction between the ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production” (Postone 43). For Postone, “Marx’s category of value and his conception of capitalist relations of production...must be grasped in relation to the mode of production as well” (Postone 44).

Postone’s historically specific account of labor places “considerations of temporality and a critique of production at the center of Marxian analysis” (Postone 5). The transition from interpreting Marxism primarily as a theory of distribution rather than a theory of production elicits yet another dialectical inversion in Postone’s theoretical approach and bears significantly on our discussion of reification. As a theory of distribution, domination in capitalism appears objectively as the oppression of one class

by another, and is enabled by the ownership of private property in the means of production. The antagonism between classes is taken to be concrete and visible such that individual workers can be made aware of the suffering to which they are subjected rather easily. As a theory of production, by contrast, forms of domination are interpreted as the result of “a historically unique form of social mediation that, though socially constituted, has an abstract, impersonal and quasi-objective character” (Postone 5). The dialectical inversion here is between *concrete* and *abstract* forms of domination; as a “historically determinate form of social practice (labor in capitalism) structures people’s actions, worldviews and dispositions” (Postone 5). Marxist commentators in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century end up turning Marxist class theory into a fetish whenever they dogmatically adhere to concrete forms of domination on the side of distribution and ignore the prevalence of domination as a result of the process of production. By treating industrial production as a necessary precondition for communist society, this form of interpretation veils the pernicious effects industrial production has on labour. Fetishism in this case refers to the inability or refusal to acknowledge that abstract forms of social mediation can be just as objective as material distribution and are equally rooted in the economic structures of modern capitalist society.

According to Postone, the fetishisation of material wealth in Marxist thought has to do with the fact that “many arguments regarding Marx’s analysis of the uniqueness of labor as the source of value do not acknowledge his distinction between ‘real wealth’ (or material wealth) and value” (Postone 25-26). This is a particularly important point considering the present state of society wherein tech companies such as Google and

Facebook are *valued* at billions of dollars without producing material products. To elucidate this point Postone cites the following paragraph from the *Grundrisse*:

Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself...He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body—it is, in a word, the development of the *social individual* which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. The *theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based*, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself. (Postone 26-27)⁶

It is striking to note Marx's comment that human beings come to relate more as 'watchmen' and 'regulators,' stepping 'to the side' of the production process rather than being its 'chief actor.' This passage seems to articulate exactly what Lukács is getting at with his notion of a 'contemplative' stance toward labor, even though the *Grundrisse* was not published until after *History and Class Consciousness*. Postone takes the above passage as proof that, "Marx analyzes the basic social relations of capitalism, its form of wealth, and its material form of production as interrelated" (Postone 27). The implication of this realization is that overcoming capitalism entails "a fundamental transformation of the material form of production, the way people work" (Postone 27). For Postone then, on its most fundamental level capitalism does not merely "consist in the domination of people by other people, but in the domination of people by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute" (Postone 30).

⁶ Postone cites *Grundrisse* p.705

Postone on 'Abstract Labor'

Postone provides a unique interpretation of Marx's category of value that proves to be illuminating with respect to our present discussion of reification, particularly with respect to the relationship between labour, space, and time. For Postone, Marx's assertion that direct labor time is 'the decisive factor in the production of wealth,' "suggests that his category of value should be examined as a form of wealth whose specificity is related to its temporal dimension" (Postone 123). The definition of labor as transhistorical, purposive social activity is more than satisfactory for a critique of capitalism which focuses strictly on relations of distribution. In this case, what varies historically is the mode of social distribution and administration of labor, while labor as a fundamental social activity remains the same. Postone wants to argue for a 'historically specific form of wealth' which is distinct from 'material wealth' (Postone 124). Such an analysis is intended to reveal that "Marxian critique is a critique of labor in capitalism, rather than merely a critique of labor's exploitation and mode of social distribution" (Postone 124). Consequently, "the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist totality should be seen as intrinsic to the realm of production itself, and not simply a contradiction between the spheres of production and distribution" (Postone 124).

At the outset of our discussion of the central concepts of Postone's argument, it is worth noting his reliance on terms such as 'totality' and 'system.' For example, Postone speaks of capitalism as "a system of abstract, impersonal domination", and as "a social formation...characterized by *personal independence* in the framework of a system of *objective dependence*" (Postone 125). The emergence of these technical terms allows Postone to emphasize his 'categorical' analysis. In other words, Postone is attempting to

resist the tendency to anthropomorphize the nature of domination in capitalism. In a certain respect, Postone is taking a *reifying* approach to his analysis of capitalism in order to *negate* the actual effects of reification and account for its historically specific features.

As we saw in the beginning of this paper, reification in capitalism involves taking alterable social relations to be fixed relations between things. Postone's materialist interpretation of capitalism demonstrates that what appear to be *genuine* social relations are in *actuality relations between (abstract) objective forces*. Marxist critique that focuses too heavily on class relations has a tendency to fall prey to this sort of 'inverse-reification' to the extent that they attribute far more autonomy to individuals in pursuit of their class interests than the capitalist system allows. This seems to be what Postone has in mind when he emphasizes the distinction between relations of distribution and relations of production. Granted, it may certainly have been more difficult for nineteenth century theorists to recognize this more pernicious underbelly of capitalism. But while the material conditions have remained more or less unchanged, capitalism in the last two centuries has demonstrated that, at its core, it functions as an abstract system of 'objective forces' which dominate individuals from above. While there are vast discrepancies in the *form* of domination experienced by different classes, when it comes to questions of autonomy and subjectivity, everyone is beholden to the same master. In the words of Theodor Adorno "even those at the top are merely functions of their function," (Adorno 6).

Postone argues that, in the course of writing the *Grundrisse*, Marx discovered the essential element that allowed him to structure his mode of presentation in *Capital*: namely, the commodity. For Postone,

The category ‘commodity,’ in Marx’s analysis, does not simply refer to an object, but to a historically specific, ‘objective’ form of social relations—a structuring and structured form of social practice that constitutes a radically new form of social interdependence. This form is characterized by a historically specific duality purportedly at the core of the social system: use value and value, concrete and abstract labor (Postone 139).

Postone departs from most Marxist theorists in his interpretation of what these concepts actually represent in the work of Marx. According to Postone “the historical dialectic does not result from the interplay of subject, labor, and nature, reflexively shaping the material objectifications of the Subject’s ‘labor’ upon itself,” but is rather “rooted in the contradictory character of capitalist social forms” (Postone 140). In other words, when Marx is talking about ‘value’ and ‘use value’, or ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract labor’, he is not talking about *things* which have always existed and are subsequently distorted by capitalist economic relations. Rather-- and this point is crucial-- Postone is arguing that value, as Marx describes it, *only exists under capitalism*. This leads Postone to make the remarkable claim that “*Capital*...is an attempt to construct an argument that does not have a logical form independent of the object being investigated” (Postone 141). Rather than providing the framework for a dialectical analysis historical development, *Capital* represents the dialectical unfolding of concepts which represent social forms within a historically specific totality.

Postone justifies this interpretation by suggesting that “a peculiar characteristic of capitalism is that it exists as a homogenous totality that can be unfolded from a single structuring principle” (Postone 140). We see this process unfolding in *Capital* to the extent that the commodity serves as this single structuring principle. Postone is quite right when he suggests that, taken in isolation, Marx’s description of the commodity is

abstract and unsatisfactory. Indeed, if one were to stop reading *Capital* after the section on the commodity it would be almost impossible to have a clear idea of what Marx is getting at. The form of the commodity takes on increasingly definitive shape as Marx's analysis progresses and, as a result, is only "validated retroactively by the argument as it unfolds" (Postone 141).

At this point, Postone draws a parallel to Hegel in order to distinguish Marx's materialist dialectic from its idealist predecessor. Common to both is the fact that "the point of departure of a dialectical critique presupposes its result"(Postone 143). Whereas in Hegel, "the Being of the beginning of the dialectical process is the Absolute...which is the result of its own development", in Marx the commodity "also presupposes the full unfolding of the whole" (Postone 143). But Postone points to a unique distinction between the Marxian and Hegelian dialectic: "the historically determinate character [of the commodity] implies the finitude of the unfolding totality" (Postone 143). This suggests that inasmuch as Postone's categorial analysis argues that Marx's concepts are a good deal more abstract than is commonly understood, by demonstrating that value is nothing *in itself*, Postone has showed that value is *dependent on* the social form of which constitutes it. In this sense, the economic laws of capitalism are very much real but are not grounded in any transhistorical mode of being or fundamental truth. They are simply objective functions of the economic/social forms which circumscribe them and only exist so long as these forms are perpetuated. Ultimately then, Postone contends that Marx's "explicit arguments deriving the existence of value...should not be seen as 'proof' of the concept of value...those arguments are presented by Marx as forms of thought

characteristic of the society whose underlying social forms are being critically analyzed” (Postone 142).

At the beginning of his discussion of ‘abstract labor,’ Postone notes that the key interpretive factor in *Time, labor and social domination* is the contention that “the historically specific character of labor in capitalism lies at the heart of Marx’s critical theory” (Postone 144). The double character of labor as both the *object of* analysis and the *grounds for* critique is best exemplified by what Marx terms ‘abstract labor.’ Postone contends that,

The distinction Marx makes between concrete, useful labor, which produces use values, and abstract human labor, which constitutes value, does not refer to two different sorts of labor, but to two aspects of the same labor in commodity determined society (Postone 144).

There are not two different sorts of labor embedded in the same commodity; rather, the same labor that constitutes the use value of the commodity is transformed into abstract labor in the process of production. Since labor power is purchased according to its quantitative value as socially necessary labor time, rather than the qualitative particularity of the labor itself, abstract labor veils the qualitative differences between the use-value of concrete labor in exchange. According to Postone , for most commentators “abstract labor has been treated implicitly as a mental generalization of various sorts of concrete labor rather than as an expression of something real” (Postone 146). This view is not all that surprising given that Marxian concepts are most frequently treated as the result of a dialectical process rather than as categories which are unfolded through that process. In fact, taken in isolation from particular commodities, it is almost impossible to see how abstract labor could be something ‘real.’ However, when we consider the role that

abstract labor plays in terms of the social interdependence characteristic of the capitalist totality, we realize that it is indeed something *real* or *objective*. The actuality—and hence manifestation—of abstract labor is posited each time one commodity is exchanged for another. The existence of the money form as the universal means of commodity exchange, and the dispensation of wages for given amounts of labor time, are both grounded on the reality of abstract labor. Thus even though abstract labor does not have a material form, it nonetheless takes on the reality of a determinate social object.

The distinguishing feature of labor which makes it historically specific to capitalism on Postone's account, is that it is 'self-mediating.' In societies based on commodity exchange people do not consume what they produce but rather produce and exchange commodities in order to acquire *other* commodities. In *Capital* Marx writes: "in order to become a commodity, the product must cease to be produced as the immediate means of subsistence of the producer himself...this only happens on the basis of one particular mode of production, the capitalist one" (Marx 273). In earlier epochs, the various forms of trade that prevailed had one thing in common—exchange was possible through the medium of *overt* social interactions i.e. barter. That is to say, in order to get bread people went to the baker, to get produce they went to the farmers market, to get meat they went to the butcher and so on. Furthermore, what people produced and what they consumed was generally proportionate to the material goods which satisfied their basic needs; products which were concrete 'need-satisfiers' were exchanged for other concrete 'need-satisfiers'. By contrast, in societies characterized by the universality of the commodity form it is labor itself that takes the place of the aforementioned 'overt' or 'direct' social relations. For Postone, this function of labor is

unique and is characterized by its *reflexivity*. Thus, “labor and its products mediate themselves in capitalism; they are self-mediating socially” (Postone 150).

Postone’s description of the ‘self-mediating’ character of labor in capitalism demonstrates a profound reading of Marx and represents an important conceptual contribution to Marxian analysis in the twenty-first century. This idea is particularly relevant to a discussion of reification because to speak of something as ‘self-mediating’ is to suggest a certain degree of automaticity. Postone wants to point to the conceptual core of *how* capitalist exchange appears to take on a life of its own. In order for capitalist exchange to engender all sorts of abstract, objective laws there has to be some semblance of self-generating movement, which takes place over and above the actions and interests of individuals. For Postone this semblance is ‘abstract labor,’ which “functions as a socially mediating activity” (Postone 150). It is important to note that Postone does not dispense with an understanding of ‘concrete labor.’ Indeed, he notes that “in producing use values, labor in capitalism can be regarded as an intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion” (Postone 150). While Postone spends a lot of time critiquing transhistorical conceptions of labor, it is evident that what he takes issue with is not their understanding of ‘concrete labor’ but rather their failure to adequately grasp the nature of abstract labor. In fact, as we will see later, it is important for Postone to keep such definitions of labor so that he can envision what labor would look like in a society with different social forms.

Postone goes on to argue that “the self-grounding moment of labor in capitalism imparts an ‘objective’ character to labor, its products and the social relations it constitutes” (Postone 151). Moreover Postone adds that “in constituting a self-grounding

social mediation, labor constitutes a determinate sort of social whole—a totality”(Postone 151). This is due to the fact that each commodity embodies a duality insofar as it represents *both* use value *and* exchange value. A given commodity’s function as a social mediation is independent of its particular material form and relates to the totality of exchange relations. Thus, “commodities acquire two dimensions: they are qualitatively particular, yet they also possess an underlying general dimension” (Postone 151). According to Postone, it is this duality that characterizes the capitalist social formation. However, to further complicate matters, while the underlying forces which pertain to abstract labor form the objective grounds of social relations under capitalism, overt and direct social relations do continue to exist. As a result, it is often tempting for theorists to focus on more manifest, visible forms of social antagonism—e.g. class conflict—to the detriment of deeper analysis. For the contemporary social theorist, it is imperative to recognize that “capitalist society is ultimately structured by a new level of social interrelatedness which cannot be adequately grasped in terms of the overtly social relations among people or groups” (Postone 153).

The reifying mystifications elicited by commodity exchange are the result of objectified social forms. Since the fundamental characteristics of capitalist exchange emerge from the historically specific form of *abstract* labor embedded in commodities, the abstract laws that govern them are only visible in *objectified* form. Labor, in capitalism, “constitutes a sphere of objectified social relations which has an apparently nonsocial and objective character...and is separate from, and opposed to, the social aggregate of individuals and their immediate relations” (Postone 154). Because labor is self-mediating socially, it *appears* to function according to objective laws when in reality

these laws are nothing more than the pattern which emerges from the objectified forms of commodities. It is precisely this aspect of capitalist exchange that reification brings to light. Corresponding to the duality of labor objectified in the commodity, according to Postone, are two forms of social wealth: value and material wealth (Postone 154). Postone defines material wealth as “the objectification of various sorts of labor, the active relation of humanity to nature” i.e. the objectification of concrete labor (Postone 154). Value, by contrast, is the objectification of abstract labor. From this, it follows that value is a result of social mediations: “it is at once a historically determinate, self-distributing form of wealth and an objectified, self-mediating form of social relations” (Postone 154). Whereas material wealth pertains to capitalist relations of distribution, value is an essential category of capitalist relations of production.

Marx begins his critique of capitalism with the commodity because it is the material objectification of the double character of labor in capitalism; insofar as it represents both use-value and value it constitutes the objective form of concrete labor and represents a socially mediating activity i.e. exchange. Consequently, Postone argues that the commodity “is the fundamental structuring principle of capitalism, the objectified form of both relations of people with nature as well as with each other. It is both a product and a social mediation” (Postone 154-155). As we saw earlier, Postone likens Marx’s unfolding of categories in *Capital* to Hegel’s philosophy as presented in the *Phenomenology*. For Postone, this comparison is accurate because Marx’s work can be read as “an immanent metacommentary on the social constitution of philosophical thought” (Postone 156). For Hegel, “the Absolute, the totality of subjective-objective categories, grounds itself. As the self-moving ‘substance’ that is ‘Subject,’ it is the true

causa sui as well as the endpoint of its own development” (Postone 156). Postone argues that, from this perspective, Marx’s analysis of the double character of labor in capitalism “allows him to conceive of this labor as a nonmetaphysical, historically specific *causa sui*. Because such labor mediates itself, it grounds itself (socially) and therefore has the attributes of ‘substance’ in the philosophical sense” (Postone 156). Further, Postone is able to make the remarkable claim that “capitalism, as analyzed by Marx, is a form of social life with metaphysical attributes—those of the absolute Subject” (Postone 156). Provocative as this claim sounds, it should not be understood as suggesting that Marx deals with social categories in a traditional philosophical sense. Indeed, Marx makes it abundantly clear throughout his work (and particularly in the *Theses on Feuerbach*) that we need to move away from philosophical abstraction in order to focus thought on that which is socially and historically concrete. What Postone is attempting to emphasize is, rather, that Marx *uses* philosophical categories in order to interpret the *real social forms* that he is analyzing.

Having established the above position with respect to the relation between abstract labor and value in Marx’s critical theory, we are now able to analyze the implications of Postone’s interpretation on two fundamental Marxian ideas: alienation and fetishism. Alienation and fetishism represent the most substantial Marxian contribution to the problem of subjectivity under capitalism and are closely related to the problem of reification. For Postone, “labor in capitalism gives rise to the social structure that dominates it” (Postone 159). Through commodity exchange, abstract labor “acquires a life of its own, independent of the individuals that it mediates. It develops into a sort of objective system over and against individuals, and it increasingly determines the goals

and means of human activity” (Postone 158). According to Postone’s analysis, the name for this form of self-generated reflexive domination is alienation (Postone 159). This is a crucial point insofar as it shows that alienation is directly related to the objective forms of social relations characteristic of capitalism. There are several important implications that result from this claim: first, while alienation may be experienced *subjectively* it is an *objective* phenomenon rooted in concrete forms of economic exchange relations. Second, individuals that are alienated do not necessarily *feel* alienated in society. Third, while alienation on this account does point to an unalienated state, it *does not* entail a reference to any human essence. Based on Postone’s definition, moving beyond alienation requires a fundamental transformation of social relations and does not posit the existence of a primordial form of human activity from which one is alienated. The point is simply that alienation is the palpable expression of the individual’s inability to participate in self-realizing activity under capitalism, in addition to the individual’s tacit participation in their own domination through their labor.

Postone approaches Marx’s notion of the fetish character of commodities by way of a discussion of the relation between appearance and essence. The category of essence presupposes that of appearance insofar as it is meaningless to speak about ‘the essence’ of a ‘thing’ *if it is not distinct from* the way it appears. By unpacking fetishism in this way, Postone is able to demonstrate how objectified social processes become mystified with respect to their origins in human practice. Postone points out that, while labor constitutes social relations in capitalism, it cannot possibly *appear* in the *form* of social relations insofar as said relations are the *abstractions* of concrete activity. However, as we saw above, the dual character of labor in capitalism is such that labor is *also* an

objectifying activity that mediates between humans and nature. Thus, Postone argues, “labor’s specific role in capitalism must *necessarily* be expressed in forms of appearance that are the objectifications of labor as a productive activity” (Postone 166). It is therefore impossible to analyze labor’s function as a socially mediating activity *in itself*; in order to interpret the *essence* of labor in capitalism one must examine its objectifications. This is why Marx began his analysis in *Capital* with the commodity as opposed to labor—the commodity is the most basic objectification of capitalist social relations (Postone 168).

The fetishism of the commodity comes into play because “commodities cannot function as particular goods and general mediations at once” (Postone 168). That is to say that, while commodities represent the confluence of both concrete and abstract labor, they only ever *appear* as the objectification of the former. Or, in other words, commodities always appear in the form of material wealth as opposed to value in general. The value dimension of all commodities “becomes externalized in the form of one commodity—money—which acts as a universal equivalent among all other commodities: it appears as the universal mediation” (Postone 168). Thus, as Postone points out, “the duality of the commodity as a use value and as a value becomes externalized and appears as a commodity, on the one hand, and money, on the other” (Postone 168). This externalization of the essence of the commodity masks the abstract labor embedded within it which is why the commodity appears to be a mere *thing*.

Social relations are objectified under capitalism because labor is mediated by commodity exchange. For example, when you purchase products at a retail store the exchange of money for commodities occurs at a distance from the individual labourers that created the products. The overt social relations that surround the product purchased,

e.g. the working conditions, culture, individuality of the labourer etc., are thereby hidden in the process of exchange. The objectification of abstract social forms *through* labor masks the fact that labor takes on this function in capitalism. By following the mediational activity of labor with respect to its function within capitalist totality, Marxian analysis is able to uncover its essence as value. However, without this interpretive effort, it is difficult to grasp the historical specificity of labor in capitalism and, as a result, the fundamental function of labor as use value appears to be identical to the function it has performed historically. In other words, labor appears to be a transhistorically valid and ontologically grounded form of social activity (Postone 170). For Postone, “the fetishized appearance of labor’s mediational character in capitalism as physiological labor is the fundamental core of the fetish of capitalism”(Postone 170). Postone’s use of ‘fetish’ here is illuminating, and relates back to the core conceptual problem at issue in the phenomenon of reification. Recall both that Lukács claims that reification is an extension of the fetish character of the commodity, and that for Marx, the fetish character of the commodity begets a ‘phantom objectivity’ wherein social relations take on the appearance of a relation between things. What Postone means by ‘the fetishized appearance of labor’s mediational character’ is that, as physiological activity, labor appears to have a transhistorical essence and hence its mediational character seems to be ‘natural.’ The fetish emerges in the natural appearance of labor’s mediational character which, in reality, has to do with the form of abstract labor specific to capitalism. In spite of being a qualitatively different type of labor, which fulfills a unique function within a particular historical context, labor seems to be the same fundamental activity it has been throughout history. This appearance is because as concrete labor which creates use-value

labor *is* natural, but the form of abstract labor which creates exchange value is unique to capitalism. As such labor in capitalism *appears* to be something ontologically ‘given’ rather than something which is socially constituted, and consequently the laws of exchange which govern labor *seem* to be objectively given in the same sense.

Postone on ‘Abstract Time’

Having established that labor in capitalism is a historically specific phenomenon, Postone shifts the focus of his analysis to how labor took on this particular form. As we have seen, material wealth is the result of the objectification of concrete labor whereas value is constituted by the objectification of abstract labor. While abstract labor constitutes general social mediations, it can not be expressed in terms of objectifications of concrete labors nor measured by their quantity (Postone 188). As an objectification of *abstract* rather than *concrete* labor, the measurement of value does not relate to the various physical characteristics of commodities but rather to what all commodities have in common: the expenditure of labor. In Marx’s analysis, “the measure of the expenditure of human labor that is not a function of the quantity and nature of its products...is time” (Postone 189). According to Postone, “the form of wealth (value) *and* its measure (abstract time) are constituted by labor in capitalism as ‘objective’ social mediations” (Postone 189). With respect to labor, the process of abstraction refers to a social process that removes the particular qualities of concrete labor and use value. Similarly, abstract time is a category which represents an abstraction from the physical quantities of commodities exchanged.

Postone’s is ‘abstract time’, is a more basic variation of Marx’s ‘socially necessary labor time’. Marx defines ‘socially necessary labor time’ thusly:

Socially-necessary labor-time is the labor-time required to produce any use-value under the prevailing socially normal conditions of production and with the prevalent socially average degree of skill and intensity of labor (Marx 129).

At first glance, this may seem to be a straightforward, operational definition, but upon further analysis it is evident that Marx's definition points to the sort of mediational activity that Postone is constantly emphasizing. In particular 'socially normal conditions of production' points to a certain social mediation insofar as a given society's productive capabilities are directly related to a wide variety of socio-historical phenomena. Both 'socially necessary labor time' and 'degree of skill of labor' would be impacted by class struggle over terms and conditions of labor, the education and health of workers, the affluence and development of the society, population trends, natural resources, military conflict etc. Furthermore, socially necessary labor time is neither static nor stable. When the economic life of society is flourishing we can expect productive capacity to increase, but in times of military conflict, economic turmoil, natural disaster, or social upheaval—to name but a few such factors—progress in productive capacity can certainly regress. Thus, "the determination of a commodity's magnitude of value in terms of socially necessary labor time indicates that the reference point is society as a whole" (Postone 191).

Abstract time takes on an objective character when it is used to order individual activity. That is, while it is abstract and does not refer to any *concrete, individual* application of labor its referent is to the objective state of a given society at a given point in history. As Postone astutely notes,

As a category of the totality, socially necessary labor 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 191).

The idea that ‘time becomes necessity’ brings us to the core of reification, and should be thought in the same terms as Lukács’ claim that reification “reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space”(Lukács 89). When we consider that time is the universal measurement for human existence, to say that ‘time becomes necessity’ suggests that *all* human activity is being subjected to the same form of domination. For Lukács, of course, the name of this particular form of domination is reification, and this is the key reason why Lukács is still relevant today. Recall that earlier we related this problem to the transition from *qualitative* to *quantitative* valuation—we are now in a better position to examine why this is the case. Postone’s distinction between a ‘transhistorical’ and ‘historically specific’ conception of labor in Marx’s thought proves to be remarkably illuminating on this account. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx speaks of labor as ‘life activity’: “in the first place, labor, *life-activity*, *productive life* itself, appears to man merely as a *means* of satisfying a need—the need to maintain the physical existence” (Marx EPM 61). The distinguishing facet of *human* labor—in contradistinction of the ‘labor’ of animals—is that “man has conscious life activity.” Whereas “the animal is immediately identical with its life activity,” humans “make their life activity itself the object of their will” (Marx EPM 62). In other words, animals produce only to satisfy the immediate needs required for the survival of themselves and their offspring, while humans produce ‘universally’ for the benefit of the totality of the species. Marx’s transhistorical conception of labor thus has to do with ‘man’s unique species-being;’ for Marx “the object of labor is, therefore,

the *objectification* of man's species life" (Marx EPM 62). Postone's articulation of the historically specific character of labor under capitalism highlights the degree to which labor in the transhistorical sense, as fundamental life activity, has been reified. Lukács' claim that 'time becomes necessity' is not specific to the experience of labor time in the process of production but extends to all areas of human life activity.

Consequently, there is a certain critical potential embedded in this transhistorical conception of labor. For Marx, "animals produce only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom" (Marx EPM 62). In the final analysis, Postone's emphasis on the historically specific nature of labor under capitalism suggests that Marx's description of labor as 'life activity' does not point to what labor *is* or how it *was* but rather to how it *could be* under different relations of production. Marx goes on to talk about *estranged* labor which he describes as "tearing away man from the object of his production" (Marx EPM 62). Immediately after this passage, Marx goes on to bemoan the fact that "estranged labor makes man's species life a *means* to his physical existence...it turns man's species being into a *means* to his *individual existence*" (Marx EPM 63). Postone wants us to think of this 'object' of production as labor *itself*, rather than a material *product* that is the result *of* labor. In other words, Postone wants to emphasize the degree to which labor is *always already* estranged in capitalist exchange; we should think of estrangement as a result of the overall process of social mediation *through* exchange rather than at the specific production of any given commodity.

We can derive the utopic element at play in this idea by considering the inverse of estranged labor: if estrangement reduces labor to a *means* of preserving *individual*

existence, speaking of labor that is *free from* estrangement presupposes that the ends of such labor *are not* self-preservation. If individuals did not need to worry about self-preservation, labor could fulfil its essential function as self-realization. When Postone speaks of labor as ‘historically specific’ to capitalism he is speaking of an estranged form of labor that functions as a *means*. According to Postone, “the goal of production in capitalism is neither the material goods produced nor the reflexive effects of laboring activity on the producer, but value...surplus value” (Postone 181). But value, as we have seen, results from abstract labor and is thus a quantitative category. There is no qualitative difference between the value of any two commodities, regardless of how different they may be—one million dollars worth of toilet paper is equal in value to a million dollar house. Thus, “production for (surplus) value is production where the goal itself is a means. Hence, production in capitalism necessarily is quantitatively oriented, toward ever-increasing amounts of surplus value” (Postone 181).

The claim that *all* human activity is subjected to reification is not hyperbolic. In fact, one could go so far as to assert that the extension of reification to all spheres of life marks the point of demarcation between industrial capitalism and late-capitalism. Marx’s most extended discussion of temporality in *Capital* comes in the sections on the production of surplus value and the working day. In those sections, Marx shows that the working day is split into two portions: that which expends necessary labor-time and that which expends surplus-labor time. These two portions of the workday correspond to the various forms of the dual nature of labor we have been discussing to this point—abstract vs. concrete labor, material wealth vs. value, use-value vs. exchange value. We do not have the time here to go into a detailed discussion of the transition from constant to

variable capital, but suffice to say that, in capitalist society, the *value* created by the expenditure of a worker's labor time is *necessarily* greater than the value of the wages they receive. Those that interpret Marx's work as a theory of distribution focus on the second half of the workday and fail to see the dual significance of the first half. For Marx, necessary labor time is necessary for the worker, because they must produce "value in proportion to their average daily requirements...in order to gain the means of subsistence necessary for his own preservation" (Marx 324). But, and this is crucial, Marx also thinks this part of the workday is necessary for capitalists "because the continued existence of the worker is the basis of [the capitalist] world" (Marx 325).

Under industrial capitalism, socially necessary labor time was such that the portion of the workday devoted to necessary labor was substantial. Under 'late' or 'industrial' capitalism by contrast, socially necessary labor time is so much lower due to increased productivity that the portion of the workday that constitutes necessary labor is infinitesimal. Compared to the living conditions of the proletariat a century and a half ago, the present day working class works far less and consumes far more. This is the result of the difference between material wealth, value and their relation to processes of production. For Marx, "although machines do yield increased material wealth...they do not create new value" (Postone 196). In short, this is because machines represent constant rather than variable capital. The social implication of this dynamic is that value will not increase due to increased production alone; in order for value to increase any increase in supply must be accompanied by a corresponding rise in demand. In capitalism, workers need wages *not only* to survive but more importantly so that they can *participate in exchange*. Under late capitalism—at least in affluent countries—workers enjoy far better

living conditions and own far more material wealth. But in order to keep the productive machinery in motion and thereby perpetuate the process of accumulation, capital attempts to appropriate *all* human life-activity. The *creation* of surplus value occurs through the process of production, while the *realization* of surplus value is a result of consumption. In order to keep the productive apparatus moving in perpetuity, capital appropriates life activity on the side of production through the commodification of labour time and appropriates life activity in the realm of consumption through the commodification of *free time*. We will see how free time relates to the phenomena of reification in the final section of this paper in order to evaluate its political significance and its relation to subjectivity.

Abstract vs. Concrete Time

Postone turns to an analysis of the various forms and conceptions of time in order to elucidate the relation of socially necessary labor time to the nature of time in modern capitalist society. The majority of these conceptions can be broadly characterized in terms of one essential factor: whether or not time is considered to be a *dependent* or *independent* variable. Postone calls time that is dependent on external events ‘concrete’ time, and time that is independent of external factors ‘abstract’ time. As functions of events, ‘concrete’ conceptions of time “referred to, and are understood through, natural cycles and the periodicities of human life as well as particular tasks or processes” (Postone 201). Under these conceptions, “a relationship exists between the measure of time and the sort of time involved” (Postone 202). Thus, ‘concrete’ time is not a constant unit, but varies in accordance to the types of activity being performed. By contrast, ‘abstract time’ refers to “uniform, continuous, homogeneous, “empty” time, which is

independent of events” (Postone 202). For Postone, the conception of abstract time which came to dominate in Western Europe between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries,

Was expressed most emphatically in Newton’s formulation of “absolute, true and mathematical time [which] flows equally without relation to anything external.” Abstract time is an independent variable; it constitutes an independent framework within which motion, events, and actions occur. Such time is divisible into equal, constant, nonqualitative units (Postone 202).

While such a conception of time was greatly aided by the invention of the mechanical clock, Postone disputes that this factor is not sufficient to explain the emergence of abstract time as the dominant mode of organizing social life. Accordingly, “the mechanical clock, does not, in and of itself necessarily give rise to abstract time” (Postone 206). Rather, the more significant factor appears to be “the organization of social time,” by which Postone means the application of a uniform system of constant time in order to structure the daily activities of individuals within a particular society. Against most commentators, Postone argues that the relation between the mechanical clock and abstract time is actually an inverted one. In other words, rather than the mechanical clock giving rise to abstract time,

This technical invention itself, as well as a conception of abstract time, must be understood in terms of the ‘practical’ constitution of such time, that is, with reference to an emergent form of social relations that gave rise to constant time as units and, hence, abstract time as socially ‘real’ and meaningful (Postone 212).

In support of this argument, Postone points to the use of mechanical clocks and ‘work-bells’ within the medieval cloth-making industry. Unlike most other labor around this time period, the textile industry did not produce primarily for the local market, but engaged in large-scale production for export. In other words, “the organizing principle of the medieval cloth industry was an early form of the capital-wage labor relationship”(Postone 210). Implicit in this form or organization is the importance of

productivity; the work-bells were introduced to mark a period of time—the work day—that previously had been determined naturally by sunrise and sunset. Interestingly, this suggests that the conception of abstract time was particular to that specific industry and was not the dominant understanding of time for society as a whole. Farmers living outside of the city, as well as merchants that produced for the local markets, adhered to concrete conceptions of time which corresponded to the demands of their natural or spontaneous activity.

Postone's arguments about the historical genesis of abstract time are interesting, and worthy of further discussion. However, for our purposes, the importance of this discussion is the implication that Marx's determination of the magnitude of value—as socially necessary and hence abstract time—*has been constituted socially* (Postone 216). Interestingly, this point bears on Lukács' discussion of the antinomies of bourgeois thought in a curious way. Postone notes that Kant's 'Copernican turn' consisted in examining the subjective conditions for knowledge as opposed to treating the object as something which was wholly external to the subject. The process of the subject *constituting* an object "is not a function of action and does not refer to the object; it is a function of the subjective structures of knowing. Time and space, according to Kant, are such transcendental *a priori* categories" (Postone 217). Recall that, for Lukács, bourgeois thought reflected in consciousness the social conditions of its time. If Postone's account of the historical genesis of abstract time is correct, this suggests that Kant's 'subjective turn' is a reflection of the social reality of individual action being determined by the social organization of time. To the extent that Kant inserts the problem of the epistemological relation between subject-object to the core of modern philosophy,

bourgeois thought has internalized the social antinomy—i.e. individual vs. totality—created by abstract time.

The social forces exerted by bourgeois society continue to shape contemporary social forms and the consciousness of modern individuals. As a result, the same social forces which Lukács argued influenced Kant's revolution continue unabated today, and force critical thought to confront them with new concepts. Capital in the twenty first century is characterized above all else, by hitherto unfathomable rates of acceleration: in technological development, concentration of capital, changing social landscapes etc. The constitution of the social world is shifting at such imperceptible speed that it is impossible for individual subjects to maintain a stable sense of identity. If this trend continues unabated, any sense of self or meaningful cultural experiences will be usurped by the reigning social pathology of the day.

Reification is more important than ever given the unique social formations of late-capitalism insofar as increased acceleration of social forces is accompanied by increased abstraction in the realm of value. Recall that, at its core, reification is the result of the fetish character of commodities which, in turn, are the result of a 'phantom objectivity' which arises in the process of abstraction of value from use-value. Under present social conditions this process becomes even more decisive precisely because the further value is abstracted from concrete use-value the more social relations become hidden behind the accumulation of capital. As Franco Berardi notes in *The Uprising*, "In Marx's writings, abstraction is the main trend of capitalism, the general effect of capitalism on human activity" (Berardi 103). In the industrial era of capitalism, this abstraction consisted in the abstraction of value from use-value and the abstraction of productive work from concrete

forms of human activity. But, as Berardi argues, “in the sphere of late-capitalism,⁷ two new levels of abstraction appear, as developments of the Marxian abstraction” (Berardi 103). For Berardi these two additional layers of abstraction characteristic of the ‘late-modern phase’ of capitalism are digital abstraction and financial abstraction (Berardi 104). In the process of digital abstraction, “transformation and production no longer happen in the field of bodies and material manipulation, but in the field of interoperativity between informational machines” (Berardi 104). Here, instead of dealing with material goods, “information takes the place of things and the body is cancelled from the field of communication” (Berardi 104). Similarly, in the process of financial abstraction, “the process of valorization no longer passes through the stage of use value, or even the production of goods” (Berardi 104).

While abstract modes of valorization reify fundamental life activity just like earlier forms of industrial production, the distorting effects of this social formation are comparatively more difficult to see. Indeed, on the surface level, a programming job in an open concept office space in silicon valley seems preferable to an arduous twelve hour workday in a nineteenth century coal mine. While this may be a less arduous way to sell one’s labor, it is no closer to being a life-affirming activity. Additionally, perhaps the most terrifying aspect of increased abstraction is that there can be a real loss of material wealth resulting from a change in abstract value. For instance, the economic crisis that shook the world economy in 2008 saw many working class people lose their homes and life savings, even though the crisis was caused by a drastic change in speculative wealth as investment bankers and stock brokers gambled with toxic loans. Even though there

⁷ Berardi speaks of ‘semio-capitalism’ but for the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to substitute ‘late-capitalism’ for the sake of simplicity.

was no demonstrable change in levels of production, or use-value created by the economy, millions of individuals lost material wealth as a consequence.

Meaning, or in economic terms use-value, problematizes abstract valorization. As Berardi notes, “in the sphere of the digital economy, the faster information circulates, the faster value is accumulated. But meaning slows down this process, as meaning needs time to be produced and to be elaborated and understood” (Berardi 105). From this we can infer that meaningful activity inhibits the acceleration of capitalist social forces. Thus, in order to combat reification under late-capitalism, it is necessary to replace value with use-value, to replace abstract time with creative free time, and to create a social system which valorizes the accumulation of meaningful human experience over the accumulation of capital. Seen from this perspective, the way that we experience time both within and outside of the work environment takes on a political impetus.

The Political Implications of Free Time

Having analyzed the theoretical impact of reification on abstract time we can now turn our attention to the political implications of this phenomenon. As we have seen above, the contemporary relevance of reification is exemplified by the relation between ‘abstract time’ and ‘free time’ and individual autonomy is threatened by the increasing abstraction of value characteristic of late capitalism. In the article *Free time as a necessary condition of free life*, social-political philosopher Jeff Noonan provides an illuminating discussion of the intrinsic relation between time, life value, and life activity. With reference to Postone’s conception of abstract time as ‘empty’ time, Noonan interrogates the political significance of what it means for time to be ‘empty’. Considering the effects of reification on the way in which individuals experience time

allows us to draw our discussion to a close and flesh out the political implications surrounding the problem of reification.

Noonan begins by examining time as the fundamental existential framework of human life. As finite beings, “the structure and experience of time is essential in establishing the framework in which our experiences, relations and activities become meaningful” (Noonan 378). As a measure of the expenditure of human life, time gives quantitative expression to various forms of life activity. Time spent performing one activity rather than another, *should* denote a preference or value judgment with respect to the way one wishes to live one’s life. However, because of the demands of the capitalist system, time becomes fragmented and is split between the work day and leisure or ‘free time’. Consequently, for Noonan, “One of the great and lasting achievements of Marx’s critique of capitalism is his understanding of the role that capitalist time structure plays in the domination of money value over human life value” (Noonan 382). Of course, in any given society there is going to be an ‘economy of time’ wherein a certain amount of life activity must be used to meet individual needs. However, as Noonan notes, “whereas the economy of time is a general social problem, the conditions of realizing an economy of socially necessary labour time is particular and relative to specific social conditions” (Noonan 382). While increased productivity under capitalism has the potential to drastically reduce the amount of life activity expended for the satisfaction of basic needs—and hence create more free time—the profit motive, as the structuring principle of commodity exchange, ensures that the potential for free time remains unrealized.

Noonan provides an excellent elucidation of the ‘emptiness’ of abstract time. Citing the experience of indigenous cultures in North America, Noonan shows that time

experienced in terms of organic unity, natural processes, and social activity is qualitatively different from the experience of abstract time (Noonan 384). Thus, “whereas the experience of time in indigenous culture is always full, that is, each temporal moment corresponds to an appropriate form of activity through which individual meaning and social value is produced, abstract time is ‘empty’” (Noonan 384). The ‘emptiness’ of abstract time should be understood in the sense that it is conceived in a manner which is independent from changes in the natural and social environment.

What Noonan adds to Postone’s description of abstract time is a consideration of the way it affects ‘free time’. For Marx, free time was understood as time ‘free from’ external demands on its use—as we saw earlier in our discussion of the role of labor in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. Marx believed that, once freed from its capitalist tethers, the advancement of society’s productive capacity “would unburden humanity from mundane reproductive labour, freeing its time for use according to what individuals had a mind to do” (Noonan 386). However, as Noonan astutely points out, Marx did not foresee:

the development of consumer and leisure industries that function by commodifying ‘what people have a mind to do’, and in the process undermining the life value of self-directed activity. The life value of doing what one has a mind to do is negated to the extent that it is determined in its form and content by what leisure and consumer industries offer for sale (Noonan 386).

Noonan elucidates this point in terms of life-value ethics, distinguishing between activities which bear ‘life-value’ and activities that are ‘life-blind’—e.g. average consumption under capitalism (Noonan 386). According to Noonan, ‘life-blind’ activities are perpetuated by a ‘growing apathy,’ which accompanies abundance and prevents “the realization of one’s life capabilities in ways that are equally individually meaningful and valuable to the wider social field of life support in which all exist” (Noonan 386).

It is interesting to note the similarities between apathy, in the sense above, and Lukács' discussion of a 'contemplative stance' towards labor. To the extent that reification involves a contemplative stance wherein individuals perform their labor passively and essentially take no interest in the products of their labor, it is not difficult to imagine that this stance would eventually be extended to all realms of social life. Marx had hoped that "by reducing socially necessary labour time capitalism would create a need for free time and free activity that it could not satisfy" (Noonan 387). Late capitalism, however, solved this problem by extending its reach far beyond the work day and commodifying the ways in which people spend their leisure time. In a clever inversion of the Marxian concept, Noonan calls this extension of commodification beyond the work day "socially necessary leisure time" (Noonan 387). This term is taken to denote the fact that "advanced capitalist society requires mandatory participation in the leisure industries as a key moment of the realization of capital" (Noonan 387).

The mathematical impetus which subtends abstract time leads to a conception of time as an infinite succession of 'empty' units, which are equally commensurable and yet equally meaningless. From an existential point of view, the infinite nature of universally quantifiable abstract time stands in stark juxtaposition to finite human life. Precisely *because* human life is finite, every moment becomes meaningful with respect to the cumulative narrative of an individual life. But for abstract time, tied as it is to the production of commodities, time is 'wasted' to the extent that it is not perpetuating the cyclical process of production. An infinite conception of time is necessary in a system that relies upon ever increasing productivity, but exerts a negative influence when it is a measurement of finite life activity. The manifestation of this contradiction is apparent in

everyday life when people speak of ‘doing nothing,’ ‘being bored,’ and ‘killing time.’ Strictly speaking it is impossible for a human being to do ‘nothing;’ even in our most inert states whether it be sleeping, meditating, or just relaxing we are engaged in a form of fundamental life activity. The pressure to ‘fill’ empty time with particular activities are thus part of the pressure exerted by ‘socially necessary leisure time’ to actively participate in some form of consumption, or else risk ‘doing nothing.’ As Noonan points out, “simply ‘hanging out’ and ‘doing nothing’ is not only discouraged, but also is illegal (‘loitering’) in most North American jurisdictions” (Noonan 388).

The darker underside of this same phenomena is the desire to ‘kill time.’ As the domination of abstract time comes ever nearer to encompassing the totality of waking life, the cumulation of all life activity—i.e. lifetime—becomes entirely mediated by commodity exchange. In other words, the satisfaction and happiness of individuals is increasingly dependent on *acquiring* and *spending* money, even if the activity in question occurs at several degrees of removal from the act of exchange.⁸ Noonan articulates this point nicely when he writes that:

The desire to ‘kill time’ is in a real and not only metaphorical sense a desire to kill life. It is an expression, not of being’s unbearable lightness, but its unbearable repetitiveness: a distorted psychic revolt against the emptiness and essentially lifevalueless nature of activity in advanced capitalism. (Noonan 389).

Noonan concludes by arguing that the only escape from the domination of ‘abstract time’ over ‘free time’ is a *qualitatively different* experience of time itself. This begs the question whether or not, in the final analysis, this demand is synonymous with the desire to end reification ? It is this question that we shall now turn to by way of conclusion.

⁸ In general, the vast majority of people do not identify as ‘consumerists.’ In most cases the activities they enjoy and identify with are not direct consumption, they nevertheless have to pay in order to partake in said activity.

Concluding Remarks: The Contemporary Relevance of Reification for Critical Social Theory

The present social situation demands a reconsideration of the fundamental values that ground our collective social activity. Due to the ever increasing accumulation of capital, forms of valorization are becoming more and more abstract. Given these circumstances, reification is one of, if not *the* most important conceptual tools for critical social theory today. Understanding how the commodification of labor comes to affect both the *subject* and *object* of production is the only way to fully understand the dialectical intertwinement between the prevailing social structures of capitalism and the plight of the modern subject. In order to grasp the full power of Marxian critique it is imperative that the concrete material circumstances which beget reification be fully explicated. Interpretations which remove this material foundation are blind to the real cause of reification and consequently fail to come up with any meaningful political alternatives.

The work of Moishe Postone can be used to revive the notion of reification. Postone is critical of Lukács' work, but his analysis of Marx's critical theory respects the essence of what Lukács was attempting to accomplish in *History and Class Consciousness*. Additionally, Postone successfully updates the concept and makes it relevant for the twenty-first century. For Lukács, qualitative social change could only be achieved once the proletariat, in a Hegelian manner, achieves self-knowledge or class consciousness of their unique ability to transform history. Revolution, on this account, would be the result of the proletariat asserting itself as the Subject of the historical dialectic and make the social world its object. By contrast Postone claims that for Marx

this identical subject-object is understood as “the form of alienated social relations expressed by the category of capital rather than as a human subject, whether individual or collective” (Postone 218). By shifting the emphasis of Marxian analysis from a *theory* of production to a *critique* of production, Postone is able to adapt a Lukácsian critical theory for the 21st century even though Lukács’ subject of transformation—the working class—is not revolutionary as he thought it would be.

Postone thus shifts attention from the subject of revolutionary praxis to the object of critique. As with Lukacs, Hegel is an important mediation. However, it is not the identity of subject and object that Postone borrows from Hegel, but the idea of an objective totality. Hegel, in order to overcome the subject-object antinomy, attempted to account for the constitution of objectivity *and* subjectivity with his theory of the Absolute (Postone 217). As we saw earlier, Hegel’s theory of the historical Subject as the identical subject-object resolves social mediation in the abstractly conceived Absolute. According to Postone, Marx conceives of this identical subject-object as an expression of *capital* rather than as a human subject (Postone 218). For Marx then, thought is shaped by “the ways in which humans constitute structures of social mediation which, in turn, constitute forms of social practice” (Postone 218). By taking Hegel a step further, Postone argues, Marx:

Thereby shifts the problem of knowledge from the possible correlation between ‘objective reality’ and the perception and thought of the individual subject, to a consideration of the constitution of social forms...By transforming the ways in which constitution and constituting practice are understood, this shift of focus transforms the problem of knowledge into one of social theory (Postone 218).

What this suggests is that Marx's 'philosophy' consists in turning a problem of knowledge into a problem of social constitution. However, as Lukács explains in the section on 'the antinomies of bourgeois thought,' the 'philosophical problem' that Marx is turning into a theory of social practice was initially a response to a social problem itself i.e. the organizing of social activity by abstract time. Thus, Marx is not simply turning a philosophical problem into a social one; rather, Marx is tracing a philosophical problem back to its social roots and suggesting that the only way to solve this problem is through radical social change.

As the organizing principle for capitalist society, abstract time makes up the core of the problem of reification. If, as we have just demonstrated, the problem of the identical subject-object is preceded by the domination of abstract time over social life, overcoming reification *necessarily* involves the abolition of abstract time as a socially organizing structure. Lukács identified the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history which would abolish reification when it gained class consciousness. While this may have been a naively optimistic solution to the problem of reification, it does not fall far from the mark. For Postone, "overcoming alienation...involves the *abolition of the self-grounding, self-moving Subject* (capital) and of the form of labor that constitutes and is constituted by structures of alienation"⁹ (Postone 224). Thus, instead of hoping for the emergence of a subject-object of history, social theory can point to the existence of such a Subject in actuality and approach it in negative terms.

Today, this self-moving subject is society driven by reified forces. The advantage of Postone's approach, as compared to Lukács' proletarian subject-object, is that it points

⁹ While alienation is not identical with reification, they are both the result of the same process of social mediation and hence are appropriately interchanged here.

to an already existing historical subject, i.e. Capital. For Postone, “self-generated structural domination cannot be fully grasped in terms of class exploitation and domination, nor can it be understood in static, nondirectional ‘synchronic’ terms” (Postone 31). In the final analysis class-based approaches to structural domination risk unwittingly adopting idealist alternatives to capitalism insofar as they hold fast to the belief in the historical inevitability of revolution. While class struggle will inevitably remain at the core of any Marxian analysis so long as capitalist production persists, it risks succumbing to antiquated conceptual categories if it does not adapt itself to new historical trends. For Postone, “critical theories of capitalism that deal *only* with overcoming the bourgeois mode of distribution...can veil the fact that overcoming class society entails overcoming the foundation of the mode of production” (Postone 40). Industrial production cannot be seen as a necessary ground or precondition to emancipated society, since reified forms of labour and consciousness are inextricably bound to the historical form of production under capitalism. Rather than doing away with class theory altogether, Postone is making a more universal claim about class; it is not only the proletariat that needs to be awakened from reified slumber, but all human life that is caught up in the sphere of capitalist production.

It is , of course, this final point that is most difficult to figure out; that is, what is the political course of action necessary to sufficiently changes social conditions? Conceptually, Lukács came close with his notion of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history but thus far the revolutionary class lies dormant. Postone’s work provides an excellent elucidation of Marx’s critical theory and represents an important step in the maintenance and promulgation of Marxian thought for contemporary theorists.

But, in large part, the conceptual clarity achieved by Postone was possible due to a more liberal interpretation of Marx's discussion of class theory and, as a result, Postone does not have much to offer by way of concrete political action. Postone does speak of the necessary conditions for the determinate negation of capitalism, but in the end can only remark that "the issue is not so much whether people should try to shape their world...rather, the issue is the way in which they shape their world and, hence, the nature of this world and its trajectory" (Postone 384). It is difficult to fault Postone for this claim, but it is so self-evident as to render it completely innocuous.

While I cannot offer a solution to the problem of the genesis of class consciousness I hope that this discussion has contributed at least two points to future consideration of the problem. Firstly, that reification is an indispensable concept for critical theory which promotes class consciousness by penetrating to the core of the capitalist social formation. Secondly, that moving beyond capitalism and ending reification can not happen on an individual, subjective basis. The entire problematic of reification is inextricably tied to the process of abstraction from the concrete to the immaterial. If there is ever to be a solution to this problem it must necessarily follow an inverse direction, i.e., tracing the process of valorization back to the concrete, back to use-value, and ultimately back to life itself. Class consciousness does not and can not occur from above; neither in the form of hierarchical social structures, or in the form of abstract thought. Class struggle is and will always be at the core of Marxist theory, even if it takes on a radically different form under ever changing historical circumstances. The role of theory is to trace these transformations and substitute meaningless production with life affirming activity.

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