Alienation Stories:
Franz Borkenau, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Kōstas Axelos

by

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Abstract

Alienation Stories explores a Marxist theory of alienation through selected works from three lesser known 20th Century theorists: Franz Borkenau, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Kōstas Axelos. If we read Marx's theory of Alienation, roughly, as having three parts: 1) objectification of the subject, 2) development of the subject once objectified, and 3) the return of the objectified subject to a 'higher level' of subjectivity, then my readings of Borkenau, Sohn-Rethel, and Axelos each correspond to an aspect of the theory of alienation. Franz Borkenau, read together with Walter Benjamin, corresponds to the first stage of alienation. Alfred Sohn-Rethel's discussion of the social role of the 'exchange relation' corresponds to the second stage of the theory of alienation. Finally, Kōstas Axelos' emphasis on technology as the motor of history is one attempt to supplement the theory of alienation with phenomenology. My reading of Axelos corresponds to the third stage of alienation theory.

Keywords: Alienation; Marxism; Phenomenology; History of European Language; Division of Labour; Technology

For my mother,

who didn't think I could do anything with a philosophy degree,

and who helped me anyway.

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1. Introduction: Plot and Setting

Despite the fact that 'alienation' is of central theoretical importance in Karl Marx's work, the concept does not occupy an *analytically* central position in the body of writing published during his lifetime. Indeed, "'Alienation' or 'estrangement' [*Entfremdung, Entäußerung, Veräußerung*] was not a featured concept in Marxism, or in scholarship on Marx, before 1932,"[1] when key texts from Marx's youth became available in the West. This is not to say that the concept was Marx's invention. Prior to the 1932 publication of Marx's early philosophical writings the term alienation was in use, but its meaning had "changed several times over the centuries. In theological discourse it referred to the distance between man and God; in social contract theories, to loss of the individual's original liberty; and in English political economy, to the transfer of property ownership."[2] It was in the work of G.W.F. Hegel that the concept of alienation attained its current *philosophic* status as a properly epistemological concept[3] and, thus took the form that would enable it to play a structuring role in Marx's thought and analysis. At the same time, the concept of alienation would become the source of what, for some, would come to be seen as a significant weakness in Marxist theory.

[1] Terrell Carver, "Marx's Conception of Alienation in the Grundrisse," in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, ed. Marcello Musto (New York: Routledge, 2008), 48.

[2] Marcello Musto, "Revisiting Marx's Concept of Alienation," *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2010): 79; For a much more detailed discussion of Musto's historical timeline see part 1 of István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[3] There is considerable debate amongst philosophers about the exact definition of 'concept'. Plato's theory of forms occupies an early position in the debate amongst philosophers of the Western tradition. John Locke, J.S. Mill, Immanuel Kant, and Hegel are some of the modern figures who articulate positions on the definition of 'concepts'. In any case, my point here is not to defend one use of 'concept' over another, but rather, to suggest that the term alienation enters the realm of philosophical debates in epistemology with Hegel.

For Marx, Hegel's use of the concept of alienation provides a glimpse into the true conditions of modern existence; however, owing to its idealist underpinnings, Hegel's understanding of alienation requires modification along materialist lines. According to Andrew Feenberg, "Marx argues that Hegel's term 'alienation' stands for the uncomprehended object of thought. … The return of the alienated," a necessary step in both Hegel and Marx's respective theories insofar as the historical subject is not to remain mired in a dystopia of the 'end of history', consists, for Hegel, "only in surpassing the cognitive immediacy of the object."[4] In other words, alienation, for Hegel, is both produced and overcome in the realm of pure thought – which is to say intellectually, in the realm of mere philosophy; here it remains detached from the sensuous material existence of the lifeworld. Marx's reading of his teacher is meant to account for and overcome the conservative implications of Hegel's socio-political philosophy:

> In its social application [Hegel's] method leaves the world exactly as it was before, tacking a certificate of rationality onto every form of oppression. Since alienation is, at least for Hegel, really overcome in philosophy, the need to change the [material] world has vanished.[5]

This critique, in part, provides the impetus for Marx's famous claim in the *Theses on Feuerbach*: "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[6] And it is with this in mind that we can say that Marx's corrective to the Hegelian theory of alienation is methodological. It is methodological in the sense that Marx's intention is not only to anchor revolutionary praxis in the material conditions in which people find themselves under capitalism, but also to identify the existential ground on which to stand the future-oriented, de-alienating praxis that underwrites Marx's politico-philosophical project: the overcoming of merely contemplative metaphysical philosophy.

[4] Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), 49.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Revised & enlarged. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 145.

> Hegel's conservatism, Marx believes, results from describing real alienation as the phenomenal appearance of the alienation of reason. For Hegel the alienation of the individual in the *ancien régime* did not consist in the fact that he [sic] was reduced to an 'abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being,' but in the fact that the state did not correspond to its concept, that, in practise, it could not command the rational obedience of its subjects. Once the state has been reformed, then it *can* command rational obedience even from an 'abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being.' There is thus a merely contingent relation between philosophy and Marx's 'real' alienation, which consists in human misery and dependence. The philosopher becomes the 'enemy' of human community in demonstrating to it that it should accept its fate without protest. He withdraws the moral credit of the oppressed by rationalizing the established order.[7]

By grounding his theory of historical subjectivity in an epochally immanent critique of lived conditions under capitalism (alienated conditions of life, in other words), Marx aims to articulate the conditions for the free development of modern thought, indeed of modern human life. As an ideological project, this entails disentangling the metaphysical fetters of the Western philosophical tradition via the critique of that very tradition. Put another way, it is precisely because of alienation, because of the nature of human existence under capitalism that for Marx "man [sic] is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,"[8] and that ultimately humankind will recognize these relations as alienated, as distorted – and, it is supposed, subsequently undertake to overcome its alienated condition.

As Bertell Ollman points out, alienation, or the "distortion in what Marx takes to be human nature is generally referred to in language which suggests that an essential tie has been cut in the middle."[9] Indeed, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx outlines some of the social manifestations of alienation. First, labour is said to be alienated on at least two counts: "(1) The relation of the worker to the *product of*

[7] Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory*, 49–50.

[8] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, Reprint. (New York: Verso, 1998), 38–39.

[9] Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 133.

labour as an alien object exercising power over him [sic]," and; "(2) The relation of labour to the *act of production* within the *labour process*. This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him."[10] In addition, Marx claims that under capitalism, due to generalized social competition, we are alienated from one another and, ultimately, from the species.[11] 'Species alienation' is perhaps the most damaging of all these manifestations, since it prevents us from acting collectively to create our history, our world, which itself is the very type of action needed to overcome capitalism in Marx's analysis. Finally,

> what is left of the individual after all these cleavages have occurred is a mere rump, a lowest common denominator attained by lopping off all those qualities on which is based [the individual's] claim to recognition as a man [sic]. Thus denuded, the alienated person has become an 'abstraction'.[12]

The task of the historical materialist is, therefore, to overcome alienation, social abstraction, which can be understood as the dominant structuring condition of contemporary life.

However, by the end of WWI, and certainly no later than the 1930's, the period in which "the German proletarian revolution should have occurred and tragically failed"[13] had come and gone. By the mid-1950's the possibility of Marxist revolution in the West was distant, to put it mildly. And this is precisely the weak point in Marx's theory of alienation. For as Ollman points out, "if alienation is the splintering of human nature into

[10] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 73.

[11] Ibid., 74.

[12] Ollman, *Alienation*, 134 On the same page, Ollman goes on to say that abstraction "is a broader term Marx uses to refer to any factor which appears isolated from the social whole. It is in this sense that estranged labor and capital are spoken of as 'abstractions'. At its simplest, 'abstraction' refers to the type of purity that is achieved in emptiness." This is a very important point, since it identifies one of the bases for Marx's theory of ideology. Moreover, this provides us with a clue as to an often un-named object of critique in Marx's discussion of alienation (and ideology), namely abstraction.

[13] Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: a Critique of Epistemology* (New York: The Macmillan Press, 1978), xi.

a number of misbegotten parts, we would expect communism to be presented as a kind of reunification. And this is just what we find"[14] in Marx's prognoses. It is thus the failure of the return from alienation that led to an array of re-articulations of Marxist thought in the 20th Century – of which some of the most well-known works emerged in the literature of the Frankfurt School, influenced by Georg Lukács and, to a lesser extent, Max Weber. These were re-articulations that, according to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, "evolved as the theoretical and ideological superstructure of the revolution that never happened."[15] As Marxist theoreticians, critics, and supporters began to search for weaknesses and/or potentially useful supplements to Marxist social and political theory in order to understand the causes of their disappointed political expectations, theories of alienation multiplied, along with theoretical critiques that sought to do away with the question of alienation entirely (see, for example, Louis Althusser).[16] According to Ian Angus, "the historical disappointment – or perhaps one should say more cautiously, the terrible delay – of this expectation led both to the supplementation of Marxism by phenomenology and the attempt thereby to re-assert the reversal of alienation by phenomenological means."[17]

For example, Herbert Marcuse's phenomenological Marxism has been well-documented in the work of Andrew Feenberg and Douglas Kellner as one of the attempts to bring phenomenology and Marxism together.[18] Ultimately, Marcuse's project returned to Hegel and appears to fail insofar as, like Hegel, Marcuse's theory remains speculative. However, Feenberg, among others, continues to work along Marcusean lines and has developed a more materialist grounding for this theory. Nevertheless, as Ian Angus points out with regard to the dialectic of subject and object, with regard to

[14] Ollman, *Alienation*, 135.

[15] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, xii.

[16] See Carver, "Marx's Conception of Alienation in the Grundrisse," 51 for a discussion of the proliferation of theories of alienation and the ensuing backlash.

[17] Ian Angus, "Walking on Two Legs: On The Very Possibility of a Heideggerian Marxism," *Human Studies* 28 (November 2005): 336.

[18] Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of Technology* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xv & throughout.

alienation, “the tripartite story,” a version of which I intend to rehearse in this work, “going out-from-self, expansion of possibilities in externality, return from alienation to self at a higher level – and all the language and conceptual structure that goes with it, has to be abandoned if the return cannot be phenomenologically grounded,”[19] that is, if the return cannot be grounded in real material experience.

Ultimately, I leave the Marcusean project to those better qualified to undertake it. But I am motivated by some of the same concerns as Marcuse and those who followed him theoretically. Namely, I am interested in exploring the possibility of a phenomenological basis or support for the Marxian project. With this in mind, I intend to work through the concept/theory of alienation, in part, as a phenomenological experiment, in part as scholastic exegesis, and in part as an exercise in self-clarification. As phenomenological experiment, I show that a Heideggerian reading of Marx, such as Axelos undertakes, is inadequate to the task of grounding, theoretically, a return from alienation – I then gesture toward what I think might be a more fruitful line of critical inquiry in the work of Moishe Postone. As scholastic exegesis, I have undertaken, more or less successfully, to familiarize myself with some of the important contributors to Western Marxist theory that I feel have been somewhat overlooked in contemporary scholarship. And, finally, as an exercise in self-clarification, I have sought to understand alienation as an important step in a larger project I plan to undertake, a project that seeks to trace the philosophical fallacy of solipsism from its ancient philosophical ancestry through to its contemporary permutations in neoliberal ideologies of the individual.

The story of alienation as I discuss it here is, primarily, theoretical, which is to say that I will in general be working at the level of what is sometimes called the superstructure, or ideology. However, I wish to be clear that this does not mean that I am working strictly with the ineffectual, the impractical, or with the merely contingent. As

[19] Angus, “Walking on Two Legs,” 341.

Marx points out in *The German Ideology* language "is practical consciousness."[20] As such, I begin my story by looking at a little known essay by Franz Borkenau in relation to Walter Benjamin's work on 'the storyteller' and his concept of 'aura'. Borkenau traces changes in the syntactic structure of language to the lived experience, the stories, of migrating European people in the early middle ages. He furthermore claims that changes in language signal changes in European consciousness.[21] It is in the alienation of individuals from the family, occasioned by oversea travel, that Borkenau claims to identify the emergence of Western individuality in language. Moreover, Borkenau's theory suggests that the emergence of the Western individual is a function of abstraction – the individual is "a factor which appears isolated from the social whole."[22] Thus it is here, in the historico-linguistic record that, I argue, there is significant evidence underwriting the first step in the process of alienation – going out from self.

I then move from the discussion of the history of language to a more broad discussion of abstraction and representation in the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel. In his most important work, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, Sohn-Rethel argues that it is the 'exchange abstraction' that is central to capitalist alienation. He argues along four lines of inquiry that the structures of thought in capitalist culture can be shown to align with the emergence of commodity exchange as a central organizing socio-economic principle, which is to say, with capitalism:

> (1) commodity exchange owes its socially synthetic function to an abstraction which it originates, (2) ... this abstraction is not of one piece but is a composite of several elements, (3) ... these elementary parts of the abstraction can be separately defined, and (4) ... if this is done in sufficient detail, these constituent elements of the exchange abstraction unmistakeably resemble the conceptual elements of the cognitive faculty emerging with the growth of commodity production. As conceptual

[20] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Loyd David Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, New ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co Inc, 1997), 421.

[21] For a summary of Borkenau's general claims see Randall Collins, "The Borkenau Thesis and the Origins of the West," *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (April 1, 1986): 379.

[22] Ollman, *Alienation*, 134. See n. 12 above for additional context for this quotation.

> elements these forms are principles of thought basic to Greek philosophy as well as to modern science.[23]

For the purposes of his analysis, Sohn-Rethel takes Immanuel Kant's structures of consciousness as representative in this case. And there are good grounds for doing so, not the least of which is the fact that the broad idea of 'abstraction', as Marx understands it, albeit critically, corresponds very well to the concept of abstraction in use in the work of Immanuel Kant.[24] In addition, Sohn-Rethel argues that the exchange abstraction "impels solipsism between its participants."[25] This, in light of Borkenau's work, continues to expand the possibilities for individual freedom at the level of the intellect, but simultaneously further entrenches the phenomenon of alienation, of social abstraction.

Finally, if the theory of alienation requires a 'return', then we are left with the question concerning the vehicle for this return. Kōstas Axelos quotes Marx's doctoral dissertation, in which Marx writes that "for the world to become philosophic amounts to philosophy's becoming world order reality; and it means that philosophy, at the same time that it is realized, disappears."[26] With respect to Marx's philosophy, according to Axelos, one must look at technology, at *techno-science* as the vehicle by which philosophy immigrates into the world. Indeed, it appears to be via technology that the modern bourgeoisie is able to subjugate manual labour, indeed all labour in capitalism to the sciences, to a socially alienated 'intellect'. In contrast, Axelos sees technique as the ground upon which the sciences take root and flower. Thus, via a critical engagement with Axelos' Heideggerian reading of Marx I aim to assess the possibilities for technology, understood through Axelos and Heidegger's lens, to undergird a return from

[23] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 6.

[24] Kant understands certain types of concepts as abstractions from experience. See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 159–160. .

[25] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 41.

[26] Kōstas Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 271; See also Karl Marx, "Marx's Doctoral Dissertation: Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," in *The First Writings of Karl Marx* (Brooklyn, New York: Ig Publishing, 2006), 149.

alienation. For Heidegger believes that technology is dangerous (i.e. industrial bourgeois consciousness) but that also, based on his reading of the German poet Holderlin, "where danger is, grows the saving power also."[27] In my reading of Axelos I therefore identify Heidegger's influence and examine Axelos' work to see whether his Heideggerian reading of Marx can in fact support the 'return' that would salvage the alienation thesis in Marxism.

Ultimately, I remain sceptical of Axelos' reading of Marx. While his critique of Marx often seems inescapable, this, at times, appears to be as much a function of the way that Axelos approaches Marx's thinking (via Heidegger), as it is a consequence of Marx's thinking itself. On the other hand, my scepticism aside, Axelos' reading of Marx is erudite, philosophically rigorous, and often, quite simply, correct. Thus, Axelos, if nothing else, encourages us to see where Marx's thinking failed, in praxis, to accomplish all that Marx himself had hoped, thus bringing into focus some of the theoretical work that Marx himself has bequeathed to the present and to the future.

1.1. Action and Characters

Ian Angus, above, refers to the Marxian theory of alienation as a story, a three-part story describing the historical movement, or action, of becoming in which alienation emerges, intensifies, and eventually, though still an event that awaits us in the future, surmounts itself. This three-part story thus forms the background, the setting in which I place my characters, so to speak. It is appropriate, I think, to borrow the idea of a story because I am here dealing with the history and trajectory of the theory of alienation, which is at once our history, a history that is undoubtedly a significant part of the overall movement of western thinking, and a history that indeed continues to unfold as we act it out – and this idea that we 'act' our history is significant. As 21st century moderns, or post-moderns if one prefers that term, we play a variety of roles in this narrative: the role

[27] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Toronto: Harper and Row, 1977), 28.

of storyteller, the role of actor in our story (which is sometimes coeval with the role of storyteller), the role of narrator, the role of analyst and theorist, etc. (I take care to heed Roland Barthes and avoid naming the Author as one of the parts we play).

In relation to action and authorship, German political theorist Hannah Arendt, once remarked that "the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind [sic], with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action."[28] And while we can grasp some of the actions, the subjective agencies, which animate the past and present – 'past' and 'present' correspond to the first two parts of the story of alienation – the final third of our story awaits the mediating action that might bring it into existence. For Arendt, the *action* in question is modelled on the action of Ancient Greek politics, undergirded by a robust 'public realm' in which no single author/subject holds the reigns of history. This, in a way, places Arendt's work closer, in theoretical terms, to a number of Marxists than to Heidegger, whose philosophical influence was, nevertheless, formative for her. For example, Lucien Goldmann argues that for Georg Lukács, who was inspired by Marx, "the subject of all historical action, … the subject of all human action, is a plural subject."[29] This postulate, arguably, has more in common with Arendt's politics and her philosophy of history encapsulated in the quotation above than with Heidegger's philosophy of Being. For "Heidegger's *Dasein* is only an individual."[30]

In any case, the idea of stories and storytellers, as we shall see, precludes the idea of authorship in the usual sense – that is, in the metaphysical sense that Heidegger was at pains to dismiss – wherein an author is taken to be the sole progenitor, the genius (in God's image) who produces a work, who produces 'being' out of nothing. Instead, as Walter Benjamin points out, to conceive of history as a story helps us to avoid the idea of authorship because a story owes its existence to the "slow piling up,

[28] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 184.

[29] Lucien Goldmann, *Lukacs and Heidegger: Towards a New Philosophy* (Boston: Routledge, 1977), 32.

[30] Ibid., 33.

one on top of the other, of the transparent layers [of history] which constitute… the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings."[31] In other words, the concept of a story seems to imply a plural historical subject, which in turn suggests possibilities for thinking about the manner by which our present state of social alienation might be overcome.

Thus we move from stories to theories, and from theories to dreams of the future, which when taken together land us back in the province of history, real material history. Put more eloquently:

> Stories are merely theories. Theories
> are dreams.
> A dream
> is a carving knife
> and the scar it opens in the world
> is history.[32]

The scar that alienation leaves visible in our social history is thus discernible in the work of a great many theorists – or in other words, storytellers. Many of the theorists discussed in these following pages are well-known or, at least, known in academic circles. Some however have nearly been forgotten altogether. As such, I will take a moment to introduce some of the lesser known writers who play a significant part in this telling of the story of alienation.

1.1.1. Characters

Franz Borkenau, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Kōstas Axelos were each possessed of a roughly similar set of historical experiences. They each survived Fascism despite having been members of socialist/communist resistance movements of one sort or another, and later worked in academia.

[31] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 150.

[32] Jan Zwicky, "The Geology of Norway," in *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth* (London, Ontario: Brick Books, 1998), 32.

In an attempt to account for, what seems to us today, a strange view of cultural becoming, namely the view that European history would soon culminate and be succeeded by something germinating in the Russia of the mid-20th century, Randall Collins remarks that Borkenau was "a central European, an ex-member of the Communist International and survivor of the Nazi regime, contemplating from Vienna the newly arisen prospect of atomic war, while glancing at the Soviet armies over his shoulder."[33] And indeed, Collins' claim touches on many of Borkenau's interests, though I leave it to his biographers to confirm or deny the validity and explanatory power of his comment.

Perhaps more interesting in the context of my discussion is the fact that Borkenau was loosely associated with the Frankfurt School of Social Research. According to Rick Kuhn, "The Institute for Social Research had financed Borkenau's research, the results of which appeared in its journal and monograph series."[34] However, Max Horkheimer, director of the institute at the time, wrote in a letter to Henryk Grossman that he wished to distance the institute from Borkenau's study, *The Transition from the Feudal to the Bourgeois World-View*, because of what he described as "important methodological and factual errors that [Borkenau] has made and that today, in a certain way, can become a burden for [the institute]."[35] Horkheimer tasked Grossman with writing an article critiquing Borkenau's theory of the emergence of the 'mechanistic world-view' because he wanted "to distance [the Institute] from his work, which in many respects contradicts [the institute's] own theoretical position, and at the same time to open the discussion of [Borkenau's] book."[36] Grossman eventually produced a lengthy essay in which he called into question a number of Borkenau's empirical claims concerning the thesis that "the rise of modern science, of 'mathematical-mechanistic thought,' was closely related to the emergence of the system of manufacture – the

[33] Collins, "The Borkenau Thesis and the Origins of the West," 380.

[34] Rick Kuhn, "Introduction to Henryk Grossman's Critique of Franz Borkenau and Max Weber," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 6, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 196.

[35] Max Horkheimer quoted in Ibid., 197.

[36] Ibid.

destruction of the artisanal system and the concentration of labor under one roof."[37] However, according to Moishe Postone what both Grossman and Borkenau's theories share, despite their differences, "is that [they attempt] to derive a form of thought directly from a consideration of labor as productive activity."[38]

Alfred Sohn-Rethel, like Borkenau, had resisted German fascism and fled the Nazi regime. According to Sohn-Rethel himself, he "had worked in various illegal socialist resistance groups,"[39] which culminated in his eventual and permanent relocation to England. And like Borkenau and Grossman, Sohn-Rethel was associated with the Frankfurt School.[40] But in contrast with Borkenau, Sohn-Rethel did not subscribe to the idea that abstract thought was a mere function of labour as productive activity. In other words, both Grossman and Borkenau, in this case, appear to subscribe to what Alfred Sohn-Rethel critiques under the rubric of the 'theory of reflection' – a

[37] Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 176.

[38] Ibid., 177.

[39] Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Economy and Class Structure of German Fascism* (London: CSE Books, 1978), 11.

[40] According to a relatively recent biography of Theodor Adorno, "Adorno and Sohn-Rethel had known one another since 1925, when towards the end of the summer they had engaged in philosophical discussions with Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer in Naples. There were meetings later on from time to time in Frankfurt and Berlin. In October 1936, … [Adorno and Sohn-Rethel] had met briefly in Paris, where, together with Benjamin, they had hotly debated Sohn-Rethel's ideas in conversations lasting seven hours at a time. Adorno was not surprised, therefore, to receive a typescript of some 130 pages entitled "Sociological Theory of Knowledge" that Sohn-Rethel had sent to him from Paris in the autumn of the same year. Sohn-Rethel hoped that his contribution to the origins of abstract thinking would result in a closer collaboration with the Institute of Social Research, or that at the very least they might commission a research project. Then something unusual happened – Adorno capitulated when confronted with the complexity and abstract nature of Sohn-Rethel's argumentation. Nevertheless, he declared his willingness to provide Horkheimer with an expert opinion on Sohn-Rethel's work. For this purpose, he asked Sohn-Rethel to let him have a shorter version of his project, while emphasizing that there was a whole series of similarities between his own epistemological study of Husserl and Sohn-Rethel's attempt to elaborate Marx's analysis of the commodity. What Adorno expected of Sohn-Rethel was nothing less than "the overcoming of the antinomy of genesis and validity", and he suggested a link-up with "the dialectical logic planned by Horkheimer and myself". At the same time, his critical sense warned him of the danger of "turning a materialist dialectic into a prima philosophia (not to say: an ontology)". See Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Malden, MA.: Polity, 2005), 220.

theory that owes much to Marx's discussion of consciousness (under the ideological sway of capitalist relations) as an upside-down image of reality.[41]

Sohn-Rethel came to critique Grossman and, by implication, Borkenau by arguing that those who subscribe to an epistemological theory of reflection tend to get bogged down in question begging assumptions.[42]

> The case for the theory of reflection is argued in a way which amounts to burking the main question. The human person is presented as equipped with sense organs doing the service of impersonal measuring and registering instruments such as are indispensable for scientific experiments. Here, science, far from being explained, is introduced as a given state of affairs. The historical fact that people living in commodity-producing societies develop a social form of thinking in non-empirical abstracts constituting pure intellect divided from their bodily activities – this fact is taken for granted and treated as though it were part of human nature.[43]

In other words, as Moishe Postone puts it, Sohn-Rethel's "approach is to analyze underlying structures of thought – for example, those which Kant posited ahistorically as transcendental *a priori* categories – in terms of their constitution by forms of social synthesis."[44] But it is not yet clear to what extent Borkenau continued to hold to an epistemology of material reflection. Moreover, any attempt to settle this question is outside the purview of this work. What is important for my purposes is that Borkenau's theory of the emergence of individuality is organized around the phenomenon of a sundering and subsequent reconstitution of social relations, of alienation, rather than around deterministic historico-economic structures that give rise to capitalism and whatever its successor might be.

[41] See Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 414.

[42] Neither Borkenau nor Grossman are named in the English *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, but Moishe Postone notes that in *Geistige und korperliche Arbeit:Zur Theorie der Gesellshaftlichen Synthesis* Sohn-Rethel addresses his critique directly to Grossman. See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 177.

[43] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 192.

[44] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 177.

With this in mind, Borkenau's discussion of the emergence of Western individuality is firmly lodged in the theoretical tradition of Western Marxism, a tradition that seeks, in contrast to 'scientific socialism,'[45] to understand the role of human activity in social structures, history, and thought; this places Borkenau firmly in a tradition that complements Sohn-Rethel's arguments concerning the division of intellectual and manual labour and the related emergence of abstract thought. Borkenau's argument concerning the emergence of individuality, furthermore, compliments Sohn-Rethel's discussion, in part, because it helps to explain some of the socio-cultural developments that give rise to an ideological consciousness that supports and reinforces the social activity, the social synthesis, which Sohn-Rethel sees as essential to capitalist alienation. In addition, Sohn-Rethel's analysis lends itself to a kind of interpretation that sees industrial activity, labour, as separate from, and potentially as the antithesis to, capitalist exploitation. This is important because it places both my discussion of Borkenau and my discussion of Sohn-Rethel in a theoretical position that is complimentary to Axelos' reading of Marx. Thus Kōstas Axelos' Heideggerian reading of Marx can be understood as one of the ways by which an analysis of the return from alienation might follow from a reading of Sohn-Rethel and Borkenau.

Kōstas Axelos, though not directly associated with the Frankfurt School, was deeply engaged with the Western Marxist tradition, especially in France. According to Stuart Elden,

> Kostas Axelos was born in 1924 in Greece, but [lived] almost all of his adult life in Paris. He moved to France in 1945, after the defeat of the communist forces in the Greek Civil War. He was under sentence of death at the time, and fled on the same boat as Cornelius Castoriadis and Kostas Papaïoannou. Studying at the Sorbonne, Axelos wrote his two doctoral theses on Heraclitus and Karl Marx, both of which later appeared

[45] For an interesting discussion of the genesis and changing fortunes of this concept see Paul Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism: From Engels to Althusser* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4–8.

as books, while translating Martin Heidegger, Georg Lukács, and Karl Korsch.[46]

His background and studies helped to position Axelos in the debates around the concept of alienation that broke out in France after 1945.[47] And Axelos' work, though it did not have significant influence in the English speaking world, was well-known in France, Europe, and Latin America.[48]

However, the direction that Axelos takes his reading of Marx tends much more toward a critique of Marx than either Borkenau's or Sohn-Rethel's work. Rather, "what Axelos perceived behind Marx's vision of the end of history was a new metaphysics."[49] Indeed, Axelos borrows heavily from Heidegger's language in order to build his critique of Marx, as we shall see. And though I remain unconvinced in regard to Axelos' approach, an approach that emphasizes the role of technology and instrumentality in Marx's thought, my critique of him must ultimately extend backward from Axelos toward Sohn-Rethel, and Borkenau also. But I leave this discussion for my concluding remarks. For now, let us look at Franz Borkenau's theory of language change, a theory best approached through the work of 20th century cultural Marxist Walter Benjamin.

[46] Stuart Elden, "Introducing Kostas Axelos and 'The World'," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, no. 5 (2006): 639.

[47] Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 49–52.

[48] Elden, "Introducing Kostas Axelos and 'The World'," 639; For an interesting review of Axelos by one of France's leading Marxists at the time see Henri Lefebvre, "Review of Kostas Axelos' *Toward Planetary Thought*," in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, ed. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[49] Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France*, 61.

2. The Story and Language of Individuality: From Walter Benjamin to Franz Borkenau

Walter Benjamin, quoting German neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein, suggests that the sociology of language begins at precisely the moment when, superseding its prehistory, sociolinguistic analysis ceases to understand language instrumentally. In other words, the sociology of language becomes a historical and material force at exactly the moment it becomes conscious – conscious that "as soon as human beings use language to establish a living relationship to themselves and to others, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means, but a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings."[1] So long as the social history of language remains ensnared in the traps of those who trade in the skins and pelts of doctrinaire theories and methodologies, approaches that "treat language as something isolated in itself," as something dead, reified, "obeying what specialists so fondly call 'its own laws'," [2] it – both language as such and those disciplines that make a study of it – is complicit in the very real and pressing danger facing all of us today: "the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes."[3] It is this ever-present danger to which Benjamin repeatedly draws our attention and against which he himself takes up arms.

[1] Kurt Goldstein quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 85–86.

[2] Franz Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," in *End and Beginning: On the Generations of Cultures and the Origins of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 138.

[3] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 391.

Thus, Walter Benjamin's "Problems in the Sociology of Language" cannot, productively, be read as a mere scholarly gathering and re-presentation of information and ideas concerning the state of socially oriented studies of language at a given coordinate in 'homogeneous and empty time' – that is, in chronological history. Nor, for that matter, can Benjamin's work, in general, be read in this way. This is, at least in part, because his study of language is no different in methodological orientation from much of the rest of his work. To suggest otherwise would constitute a serious misapprehension of his work. At the same time, a no less disingenuous interpretation of Benjamin's work would see his writing as a kind of optimistic exegesis of an imagined ameliorative potential in the continuation of the present, inferred from the detritus of history, from the decayed and decaying artifacts of the past – a mere exercise in speculative utopian idealism, or in idealism's next of kin, positivism. For the idealist "the illusion of the concrete rests on the reification of results," an analytic process, according to Theodor Adorno, that is "not unlike positive social science which records the products of social processes as ultimate facts to be accepted."[4] To be sure, Benjamin sees the refuse of history as instructive, but his project is neither, strictly speaking, contemplative, nor positivist. Rather, Benjamin's project is preparatory; it is a "methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution," without, for all that, subordinating this preparation "to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance."[5] And moreover, if, as Terry Eagleton suggests, Benjamin at times appears to gravitate toward a kind of Archimedean interpretive point in subjective experience, an idealist expression of a material/ideal epistemological binary rendered in rough correspondence to the 'Marxist' base/superstructure metaphor, this appearance remains superficial at best. "To leave the matter here would do Benjamin a serious injustice," serious enough that one could justifiably suspect a willful act of bad faith. "For if [Benjamin] sometimes sees 'experience' as a kind of direct impress or distillation of physical or technological forces,

[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1984), 37.

[5] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 216.

it remains true that he conjures out of such reflexiveness a subtlety of perception marvellously in excess of the model's own crudity."[6]

It is in his ability to conjure meaning to life from the remains of what sometimes seems a dead epistemology that Benjamin can productively be understood as working in the mode of socio-cultural metaphor, a mode wherein we can posit a distinction between live and dead metaphor. "A live metaphor," for Benjamin, "is a [cultural] short circuit."[7] In historical terms it is able to appropriate the energy of cultural "memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger."[8] In contrast, and with reference to a sociology of language fettered to an *idola organum* for example, "non-metaphorical ways of speaking conduct meaning, in insulated carriers, to certain ends and purposes. Metaphors shave off the insulation and meaning arcs across the gap."[9] In historical and cultural terms, then, a live metaphor is a "tiger's leap into the past."[10] As an intellectual effort devoted to the articulation of a Marxian aesthetic, Benjamin's work engages in revelatory reanimations and re-constructions (as opposed to deconstructions) of live(d) socio-cultural metaphor. His project, in broad terms should, thus, be understood as working against an instrumental conception of language in which the dead are made to toil in the service of an eternal present: "a dead metaphor is one in which the arcing between [past, present, and future, between language and history,] no longer occurs. Its energy has been diverted into and contained by the culture's linguistic grid."[11] Against dead cultural metaphor Benjamin's project is an attempt to write the poetry of revolution. As such, "it is more than ever necessary to blast Benjamin's work out of its historical continuum so that it may fertilize the present."[12]

[6] Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2009), 176.

[7] Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor* (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2003), 68.

[8] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.

[9] Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*, 68.

[10] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.

[11] Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*, 68.

[12] Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 179.

2.1. Borkenau vs. Instrumentality

"I, Hlegestr from Holt made this Horn." This is an Old Norse inscription, found on a golden horn of Danish origin dating from around 400 C.E., an inscription that is one of the earliest European examples of "a linguistic peculiarity so striking," according to Franz Borkenau, "that it is a little surprising that … due emphasis has never been laid upon it."[13] For Borkenau, what calls for emphasis here is both the use of the first person singular pronoun and also the way it is used in this context. In this case, unlike earlier but functionally similar inscriptions, "the 'I' stands before the name of the person who is 'I'."[14] Typically, in earlier inscriptions of this kind, throughout classical European languages and indeed also in Old Norse, the first person subject is referred to in the third person, often using the proper noun only – "Toeler owns this bracelet."[15] As Borkenau points out, "every student of Latin and old [sic] Greek knows that the use of the personal pronoun as found on the golden horn of Gallehus would be inconceivable in any inscription dating from any period of classical antiquity."[16]

And yet, modern linguistics, explains Borkenau, appears not to have noticed, or to have forgotten the peculiar manner in which, in fact, 'I' first appears. He readily concedes that linguists could hardly have failed, and indeed have not failed, to notice the contrast "between the ample use of this pronoun in the modern languages of Northern Europe and its scanty use in classical antiquity."[17] To compare classical and modern languages directly is a tendency of those socio-linguistic analyses that assign a central phylogenetic role to a purported internal and progressive logic in language, to 'instrumentality' in linguistic analysis. "Thus is manifested in the field of [linguistics] what in the [sociological] sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics[:] the

[13] Franz Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," in *End and Beginning: On the Generations of Cultures and the Origins of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 133.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 133–134.

[17] Ibid., 135.

alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality," an alignment that arises of the desire to "'get closer' to things,"[18] and which results in the tendency to disregard the social, spatial, and temporal contexts that mediate our relationship to those things. As such, in attempting to 'get closer' to things, analysts and observers tend to render social agency a superfluous concern in comparative linguistics; and the overlooked result of this tendency is that "a gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the [structures and entailments of linguistic forms]."[19] At the same time, and as a corollary to an emphasis on the search for parsimonious explanations of the linguistic march toward ever greater 'efficiency', an instrumentally oriented sociology of language remains almost completely blind to the anomalies that falsify its central axioms. "Contradictions [in instrumental theories of language] that cannot be ignored must be shown to be purely surface phenomena, unrelated to this mode of [analysis]."[20] For these contradictions, when taken seriously, imply the limits of instrumental language theories, limits which, like the face of death in the contemporary world, must remain hidden from sight – "today, people [prefer to] live in rooms that have never been touched by death—dry dwellers of eternity."[21]

In the same way that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,"[22] the limits to an instrumental explanation of the emergence of the 'I-form' of speech in the European languages mean the limits of the world of instrumental rationality in the sociology of language. Thus the analytic blind spot giving rise to the sociology of language's failure to recognize the importance of the inscription on the horn of Gallehus.

[18] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 105.

[19] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 251 In the context of "Critique of Violence" Benjamin is concerned to articulate a critique of a kind of analysis oriented toward forms of violence in relation to the law. However, the form of his argument is also quite serviceable as a critique of approaches to the history of languages.

[20] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), 11.

[21] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 151.

[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 68.

In other words, this blind spot arises of the fact that the inscription on the Danish horn exists beyond the logic of a self-contained, instrumentally rational linguistic world. Indeed, "no expediency can be invoked to explain the use of 'I' before names," says Borkenau; rather, in contrast with an explanation of linguistic phylogeny grounded in the logic of progressively rationalized efficiency, Borkenau points out that "'I Harald did it' is, as an inscription, not in the least more useful than 'Harald did it.' The latter, Latin way of expression is shorter, simpler, and more elegant."[23]

Borkenau then proceeds from his introduction of the problem of the 'I-form' of speech to show, rather convincingly, that to conceive of the rise of the first person singular pronoun to widespread and common use as a mere response to a change in verb endings is largely incorrect. And yet, this is the most commonly accepted explanation among grammarians who claim that "the use of pronouns arose because the verb endings became indistinguishable. The verb in je fais, tu fais, il fait sounds exactly alike. It is impossible to distinguish between them but by prefixing the pronoun."[24] The emergence of the obligatory use of personal pronouns is thus explained with reference to the emergence of phonetically undifferentiated verb conjugations; this explanation appears parsimonious, a prized quality in social scientific theorizing, but it wholly fails to account for the fact that the 'I-form' of speech makes its appearance "centuries before the endings of [verbs] became indistinct. Thus there is no possibility of using this explanation in the case of old [sic] Norse, the oldest case known to us, because in old Norse the [verb] endings were perfectly clear."[25] The facts appear rather uncooperative where language is immovably conceived in purely instrumental terms.

There is, however, a second view concerning the evolution of linguistic forms over time. And although it does not on its own contradict the instrumental explanation above, this second view of linguistic phylogeny, when taken together with the above critique puts instrumental renderings of language change further into question. At the

[23] Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," 136.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

same time, this second view sets Borkenau's discussion off in a more productive direction. According to Borkenau, there is "a widely accepted theory about the evolution of [European] language [suggesting that] the use of the pronoun with the verb might be regarded as one element in a general development of language from the 'synthetic' towards the 'analytical'."[26] This distinction between synthetic and analytical language is not particularly complicated; it only serves to demarcate, in a general fashion, languages whose signifiers tend to bring together many ideas into a single linguistic representation – synthetic language – from languages in which there is a tendency to try to assign single signifiers to single ideas – analytical language.

> The Latin said 'feci,' expressing in one and the same word the idea of doing, the fact that something was done in the past, and the third idea that it was 'I' who did it. We say 'I have done,' assigning one word to each of these three notions. It is maintained that the general trend of development goes from the synthetic towards the analytical, that the ancient languages are [more] synthetic, the modern languages are [more] analytical.[27]

In view of the argument thus far, an interpretation of the historical linguistic movement from synthetic to analytical must avoid recapitulating the conditioned explanatory reflex of the dominant scholarly ideology, an intellectual maneuver that turns us forgetfully, in the words of Martin Heidegger, toward "those idols [that today] everyone has and to which [we] are wont to go cringing."[28] In other words we must, here, avoid lapsing back into thinking about language change in instrumental terms, in terms of grammatical precision and expediency. For, as Borkenau is quick to point out, "analytical speech is not more expedient than synthetic speech, much the contrary. Nothing could be simpler than the Latin expression 'feci,' which needs three words to translate it into any modern language of North-Western Europe." Moreover, "nothing, also, could be

[26] Ibid., 137.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 1993), 110.

more precise. Students of classical languages know how many of their shades and refinements have been lost in our modern languages without economy of words."[29]

As such, once we do away with an insistent dependence on a metaphysics of instrumentality, once we position ourselves such that it is plain to see that "the transition from the synthetic to the analytical mode of speech cannot … be the result of expediency and simplification," we begin to glimpse the emergent possibility of a different kind of story, one in which the event of the 'I-form' of speech can be attributed "to a fundamental change in psychology. [And] this change of psychology is connected with the deepest changes in the structure of civilization."[30] Thus does Borkenau re-create "the chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation,"[31] amplifying the story of the horn of Gallehus from its historical moment, the one in which it was crafted, so that it resounds in the amphitheatre of experience that is the present – *refero antiquus organum*.

2.2. Information and Storytelling

Borkenau's rendering of the rise of the 'I-form' of speech maps the chasm dividing the transmission of information from the art of storytelling, a division that manifests as two opposing intellectual approaches to cultural communication. In the mode of information, communication is never more than a means to address or expedite present practicalities as defined by existing power structures; storytelling, on the other hand, allows for an interpretation of the present mediated through the past, thus allowing the antagonism between story and information to be characterized in terms of a conflict between past and present. According to Benjamin, "the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender

[29] Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," 138.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 154.

to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time,"[32] indeed, it must explain itself according to its own self-sufficient – that is, natural, timeless – laws. Thus, the present here asserts its dominance over the past via a claim to its own eternal validity. The affinity between information and the metaphysics of instrumentality at play in contemporary histories of language is thus clear. Communicated as information, "no event comes to us without already being shot through with explanations,"[33] and these explanations serve as means, as instruments and tools wielded within the contradictions of the socio-political exigencies of the moment in which they're articulated, thereby eternalizing and naturalizing the present by way of a kind of 'law-preserving violence' committed against the past. The past is made to serve, to preserve the 'laws' of the present

Indeed, insofar as the sociology of language insists on instrumentality as a central structuring principle around which to organize the intellectual labor of analysis, it mimes the relationship of the bourgeoisie to the capitalist mode of production. "For the latter it is a matter of life and death to understand its own system of production in terms of eternally valid categories: it must think of capitalism as being predestined to eternal survival by the eternal laws of nature and reason;"[34] in other words, capitalism, like language conceived instrumentally, must be seen to operate according to its own laws, which must be preserved at all costs. Equally, to understand language as an instrument requires that the progression from synthetic to analytical language be seen as both natural and rational – and thus eternally and universally validated according to the law of progress, a vulgar reification of scientific method in which the present mediates all of history self-referentially, that is egoistically, rather than history mediating the present, as with historical materialism. This constitutes a violence that preserves the present against the past, and against the future as well. But against those who see an eternal present as the end point of history, it is the storyteller who is "capable of fanning the spark of hope

[32] Ibid., 148.
[33] Ibid., 147.
[34] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 10–11.

in the past" in anticipation that such a spark could ignite the present, like the mythical phoenix in her nest, so that the future might burst forth out of the ashes. This is because it is the storyteller, the historical materialist, who "is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he [sic] is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious."[35]

In contrast with those who hawk and trade in information, remaining satisfied to establish "a causal nexus among various moments in history, … [telling] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,"[36] a storyteller has different aims. Contrasted with information, "a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."[37] In this sense, the event inscribed on the Horn of Gallehus, together with Borkenau's analysis and re-presentation, is in the mode of storytelling, that is, in the mode of historical materialism – which seeks to redeem the past in both the present and future. In other words, the story of the Danish horn, when it comes to us as story rather than information, is not so much an isolated event to be explained as it is an event that reveals itself as a structuring element of the tissue of history, of the tissue of collective memory operating on a cellular level. For "there is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis"[38] – 'I, Hlegestr from Holt, made this horn.' And, moreover, there are few stories that have been so well integrated into our collective memory than the event inscribed upon the Danish horn, the event chronicling the new use of the personal pronoun. Indeed, "the new use of 'I' [in the early middle ages] reveals the emergence of a new soul, the soul of our Western civilization."[39] Thus, the story of Hlegestr's horn is no mere means, no tool of the ruling classes, but (and here we recall Goldstein) a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost

[35] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.
[36] Ibid., 397.
[37] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 148.
[38] Ibid., 149.
[39] Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," 163.

being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings.[40] Put another way, language is, as Marx and Engels pointed out, "practical consciousness."[41] Thus, Borkenau's reference to the 'new soul' of the West is at the same time a reference to a shift in consciousness, a shift objectively expressed in language.

This new soul, this shift in consciousness, articulated in the syntax of Hlegestr's inscription expresses, according to Borkenau, "a new forcible emphasis upon the individual, a [new] reluctance to treat [the individual] as a simple element in a chain of events,"[42] in the chain of tradition. At first glance, this appears to undermine the idea that the inscription on the horn is best interpreted under the category of 'story'. After all, Benjamin suggests that one of the distinctive qualities of stories is that they are lodged firmly in tradition, lodged in collective memory in a way that "permits that slow piling up, one on top of the other, of the transparent layers [of recollection] which constitute… the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings."[43] But only a minimum of reflection on Hlegestr's horn brings us easily to the conclusion that the object itself, and also the inscription with which we are concerned, *is* firmly lodged in tradition. In part, it is the inscription's revolutionary nature, its profound expression of a point in the constellation of our history that suggests this to us. For by its very nature, revolution, from the historical materialist's perspective, is only possible on the basis of history, real material history. Marx worked this out at length in his critiques of German idealism. And according to Benjamin's powerful interpretation of Marx, revolution "is nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren."[44] The story of the 'I-form' of speech is thus one of the earliest records of the modern struggle to overcome the domination of the present by the past, of the living by the dead, of the struggle to redeem the past in the

[40] See Notes 1 & 3 in this chapter.
[41] Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 421.
[42] Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," 185.
[43] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 150.
[44] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 394.

present. As such, the inscription on Hlegestr's horn, is a chronicle, an early episode in the history of this struggle, an episode whose setting coincides exactly with the home of the storyteller.

There are two archetypes of the storyteller. According to Benjamin, "If we wish to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, we find one in the settled tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman."[45] But as Benjamin points out, in actuality stories arise with the interpenetration of these two archetypes.

> Such an interpenetration was achieved particularly in the middle ages, through the medieval trade structure. The resident master craftsman and the itinerant journeyman worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been an itinerant journeyman before he settled down in his hometown or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were the past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university.[46]

That Hlegestr was a craftsman hardly bears mentioning, since he tells us this himself. But that he was a journeyman, or was descended from journeymen, or rather from seamen, requires some further evidence. Borkenau's theory, in this respect, is incomplete. But drawing from the work of H. de Tourville who writes from the Le Play school of sociology (sometimes called social geography), Borkenau advances a rather alluring theory, particularly given what Benjamin says about the archetypes of the figure of the storyteller.

According to Borkenau, de Tourville makes the claim that changes in the structure of the family (from extended patriarchal to particularist – what we would call nuclear), the result of Scandinavian settlers' encounters with the geography of Norway "where no large patriarchal family could have lived and where a man was entirely dependent upon himself alone," were responsible for that attitude which, in Borkenau's words, "the English describe by the term 'individualism'."[47] However, Borkenau promptly

[45] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 144.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," 171.

rejects this theory because it is in conflict with the linguistic record he has been at pains to trace out; the emergence of the I-form of speech arises in "what is today Denmark and Sweden, more so than in Norway."[48] In addition, Borkenau argues that while Norwegian geography would indeed make large patriarchal families unsustainable, "there are few places in the world where the existence of such [family] units would be more favored by nature than in Denmark,"[49] the location where we do, in fact, see the first articulations of the 'I-form' of speech. And yet, while Borkenau raises a number of other salient objections to de Tourville's conclusions, he also suggests that de Tourville's "find is," for all that, "no less of the greatest importance."[50] For it is de Tourville's general approach that inspires Borkenau to look at the movement of peoples over land and sea to help explain the rise of the 'I-form' of speech. De Tourville "argues, roughly speaking that a new type of 'individualism' is the basis of Western civilization and that it can be distinguished, first in Scandinavia, then in England and Germany, and finally in France;" and here Borkenau concurs: "that is exactly what [his] language test, centered round the personal pronoun, reveals."[51]

However, where de Tourville attributes the emergence of the 'particularist' family, of European individualism, deterministically, to the influence of natural geography, to nature, Borkenau attributes the emergence of the 'I-form' of speech to the life of the people in question. For it is only partly true, what Adorno and Horkheimer say in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* that "*mana*, the moving spirit, is not a projection but the echo of the real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people."[52] Rather, there is, in our experience of nature, and the so called 'nature of things', always some minute element of projection as well. In addition, Borkenau's study of the emergence and spread of personal pronouns identifies one additional source aside from Old Norse,

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 172.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1st ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 10–11.

contributing to this linguistic development – Old Irish. And if we recall that one of Benjamin's archetypes for the storyteller is the trading seaman we are now in a position to see where Borkenau and Benjamin finally meet up face to face, so to speak. For Borkenau, "the basic law governing this entire process [of linguistic transformation] becomes visible" in the character of the itinerant seafaring journeyman. This process "has no mysterious connection with [natural or ethnic] roots. The Irish, the Saxons, and the Vikings are its carriers, because they are the three peoples who in the course of the Voelkerwanderung make the transition from land migration to overseas migration."[53] And in the course of this migration they become not poorer in communicable experience, but richer in the experience of a certain kind of freedom, communicable via the 'I-form' of speech.

In contrast with those peoples "who moved overland clan-wise, with women, children, cattle, and mobile goods," Borkenau argues that it was those who set out "for the crossing of the sea … for a new home and a new sense of activity on the other shore, without the ballast of family and possessions,"[54] that became rich in the experience of individual freedom. These people were, perhaps, the first to liberate themselves from the bonds of nature, sublimated and experienced in the form of the patriarchal family.

> The veiled misty line which separates land and sea all over the North has proved to be the frontier between the slavish collective bondage of the individual and the freedom of the person. Up to this line, semi-nomadic migrant tribes prevailed. But he who crossed it sailed into a new, proud I-consciousness – into a new freedom from which the new Western culture was to arise.[55]

Thus does Borkenau, storyteller of linguistic sociology, chronicle the cultural alchemy that turns *mana* – the appearance of subjective agency located in nature – into *aura* – the appearance of subjective agency located in the particular individual.

[53] Borkenau, "The Rise of the I-Form of Speech," 182.
[54] Ibid., 181.
[55] Ibid., 182.

2.3. The Myth of the Individual

It is in the telling and re-telling of the emergent history of the 'I-form' of speech that we begin to decipher the stories, theories, and dreams manifest and revealed as mythos of the Western individual – ego. And "though *mythos* originally meant but 'word' (being the Homeric equivalent for *logos*), the important consideration for the present purposes is that it came to mean a tale, story, fable, a *narrative* form."[56] It is here that the sociology of language comes to recognize the nature of the psycho-civilizational violence bound up with the aetiologically colonizing, in a sense lawmaking, or norm producing, event of the inscription on the Horn of Gallehus, an event inscribed as an open secret, like a scar, into our collective memory, into the history of the West. For "here 'history' is but a more 'cosmic' word for 'story,' a usage in line with the analogy between books and the 'Book of Nature'."[57] It is in these 'books', these stories – chronicles of the movement of subjective agency which at first resides in the cosmos and then, in Promethean fashion, moves to the realm of the human subject, the individual – that we catch glimpses of the relationship between ourselves and nature, between ourselves and language, between ourselves and our world – and thus our history – past, present, and future.

This relationship is mimetic; as Marx observed, "consciousness can never be anything else except conscious existence."[58] As such, collective consciousness, the 'soul' of a civilization, exists in mimetic relationship to activity. For "it is the activity of each individual which immediately motivates his [sic] manner of understanding the world and of thinking about himself. … It is because many individuals do the same thing and live in the same manner that they also think in the same manner."[59] Thus Borkenau's

[56] Kenneth Burke, "Myth, Poetry, and Philosophy," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 380.

[57] Ibid., 381.

[58] Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 414.

[59] Michel Henry, "Life and Death: Marx and Marxism," trans. R Scott Walker, *Diogenes* 32, no. 125 (January 1, 1984): 123.

claims about the relationship between that proud freedom into which we, as a culture, sailed via oversea migration, and the subsequent emergence of our 'I-form' of speech. What accounts for the spread of the 'I-form' of speech, of the consciousness of individual freedom expressed in linguistic practice is that "the very greatest capacity for the generation of similarities … belongs to humans."[60] As such, it is the mimetic faculty – our capacity for generating similarities – that helps account for the fact that not all Europeans were seafaring travelers, but also that by the early modern period most languages of Western Europe had more or less incorporated and made habitual the use of personal pronouns. And now we see, a little more clearly, how a story preserves itself, storing up its socio-historical energy so that over a long period of time "all these similar thoughts form, [mimetically], what might be termed the ideology of a class, [the soul of a civilization, or a mode of production]."[61]

At the same time, it is in this history, in Borkenau's story, that we encounter an example of the allure of the beautiful, of the work of art scaled up to the magnitude of civilizations. And moreover, Borkenau's work, his weaving of the story of the language of the west, is yet another confirmation that "never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret."[62] For our ability to decipher, to interpret, to read a secret is bound up in our encounters with stories. To read a secret, to tell a story is, after all, always a task of "interpretation, which is concerned not [solely] with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with [deciphering] the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world."[63] This is the essence of the work of art, of the beautiful in its veil, that it is embedded in experience in such a way that it is only visible as beautiful through a veil, as a secret. When the object is entirely obscured by the veil, when the veil itself is taken

[60] Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 694.

[61] Henry, "Life and Death," 123.

[62] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 351.

[63] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 153.

for the unmediated object, we are in the presence of mere, monstrous ideology, superstition, or some such other destructive, all-consuming fantasy. On the other hand, in the complete absence of a veil, beauty – culture – disappears, or rather, would never have existed. Under such conditions – conditions that belong to our animal pre-history in which there is no communication between us and our world –we would simply, were we able to go back, have "deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts,"[64] darting after that which holds our attention only for a discreet period of time, then moving on, the way we engage with information.

Our ability to decipher and interpret, to veil an object such that its beauty might appear, is a function of our mimetic faculty and resides, in its earliest articulations, in the domain of occult practice (astrology, etc). This ability is always more than a simple reactionary "cry of terror called forth by the unfamiliar."[65] It is also an attempt to enter into a relationship with the unfamiliar, to enter into "an interplay between nature and humanity."[66]

> If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from the stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading per se, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity.[67]

After all, what is nonsensuous similarity if not secret semblance, veiled semblance? For what is essential to any secret is that in order that it should not slip into the oblivion of forgetting, such that the object disappears completely behind its veil, it must always be discoverable in the interpretation of objects and events. Hlegestr's inscription is just such

[64] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1998), 8.

[65] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10.

[66] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 107.

[67] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 697.

an object and event. It provides us with a departure point for an interpretive exploration of the movement of 'aura' in the west. And what it reveals is that 'aura' collects around the 'I-form' of speech, around the individual, as a function of our proud new consciousness. And this pride is based on the feeling of freedom that arises with the emergence of Western individualism, a feeling expressed in a practical consciousness in which the personal pronoun, the 'I', usurps syntactic priority in the grammar of the West. It does so by generating its own tradition, by the repetition and re-production of similarities.

But if it is the feeling of freedom that veils the object of beauty in this story, then the object behind the veil is the experience of individuality. And as we said earlier, those that sailed into the new freedom of the individual found themselves not poorer in experience, but richer in the experience of a certain kind of freedom, the freedom from kin and the trappings of society. In short, this free individuality, stripped of its veil, and here this stripping is to be marked off from mere absence of the veil, comes to appear as its other, as what Marx identified under the rubric of alienation and estrangement – this is the revealed secret, the scar, of the 'I-form' of speech. Thus, "the divine ground of the being of beauty," divine because it demands sacrifice in order to halt its slide into to its other, alienation, "lies in the secret … [and] not in the superfluous veiling of things in themselves but rather the necessary veiling of things for us."[68] In order that our newfound individual freedom not be marched naked into the cruel light under which it is revealed as alienation we sacrifice what might have born the fruit of a harmonious social order, the virginal socio-politics of Western antiquity, to this alienation. Thus the object in its veil is no mere false consciousness, no mere opiate; rather, the price paid for individual freedom is alienation, in the same way that the door and doorkeeper is the price paid for access to the Law in Kafka's famous parable.

"Before the Law" tells of a man who comes from the country seeking to be admitted to 'the Law'. He comes upon a door and a doorkeeper. But the doorkeeper tells

[68] Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," 351.

the man that he cannot be admitted at that time. The man waits to be admitted his entire life. Just before he reaches his end, the culmination of a lifetime of requests for entry having been denied, the man from the country learns this from the doorkeeper: "No one else could ever [have been] admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."[69] Here, on a microcosmic scale, is an illustration of the relationship of the veil and the object. For the man has, in seeking *access* to the Law, already structured doors and doorkeepers, permission and prohibition, into his search. It is in his encounter with the door and doorkeeper that the man from the country does in fact gain access to the Law, not directly, however, but to the law in its veil – a veil of doors, doorkeepers, permission, and prohibition. The secret behind the door of the Law is that all laws, all permissions and prohibitions, in short, the orders of the history of the philosophy of law, are continually re-produced and preserved in the course of history, in this case a history, a man who remains obedient to Law. This is, in part, what makes Kafka's parable so hauntingly beautiful. Kafka's man from the country, thus, by his actions, creates the Law (you may not enter) in its veil – door and doorkeeper. Only to a man who sought access to the Law, believing in the power of the Law, could it be revealed that the doors and doorkeepers to the Law were for him only, he who believes. "Like revelation, all beauty holds in itself the orders of the history of philosophy. For beauty makes visible not the idea but rather the latter's secret."[70] The secret of the Law is, thus, fear and obedience, just as individuality in its veil, freedom, harbors its own secret.

What becomes visible in the story of the 'I-form' of speech is that the secret of the freedom of the individual is her social alienation. It is the free individual whose chronicle adorns Hegestr's horn, who leaves home and kin behind, who like Goethe's Doctor Faust feels free to create with impunity, indebted to no one, and who finally becomes the primary bearer of aura through the middle ages and into modernity. So when Marx says that "man [sic] is a species being, not only because in practice and in

[69] Franz Kafka, "Before the Law," in *Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka* (London: Penguin, 1983), 4.

[70] Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," 351.

theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but—and this is only another way of expressing it—but also because he treats himself as the actual living species,"[71] Marx gives expression to what we might call the aura of the free individual. And aura, here filched from the tradition of the patriarchal family, sublimated nature, takes over from the earliest attempts to gain some degree of control over nature proper. Mana – the magic that seeks control over nature, nature which is thought to be inescapable and unchangeable if not necessarily implacable – transfers to the individual who comes to see herself as subjective agent, the 'here and now' of history. Thus, the mimetic faculty, the faculty of generating similarity, via the generation of nonsensuous similarities, transubstantiates ancient mana into medieval and modern aura. In exchange, nature appears to give itself up, to sacrifice itself to the human subject. This occurs "by an unconscious ruse," whereby "human beings first began to distance themselves from nature." This occurs, in other words, through the technique of play.[72] Nevertheless, even if by the transubstantiation of mana to aura via the 'I' incantation, the human subject really does succeed in achieving a distance from nature, there is a price to be paid. It is that we create a second nature, so to speak, a human nature that takes on mythic proportions and which ultimately harvests all subjective historical agency to itself. The reign of the individual is short-lived, and while the 'I-form' of speech remains, the veil of freedom is ultimately torn from the individual, leaving her "to be manipulated [and re-clothed, uniformed,] in the interests of fascism,"[73] or rather, if we wish to use the most up to date terminology, Neoliberalism.

[71] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 74.

[72] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 107.

[73] Ibid., 101–102.

2.4. Reproduction and Play as Technology

Marshall McLuhan once wrote that "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us."[74] This is clear in the story of the emergence of the individual announced on Hlegestr's horn. For if the 'I-form' of speech is, figuratively speaking, a tool (practical consciousness) that aims not at mastery over nature (instrumentality), but instead at gaining a degree of autonomy from it, autonomy that in turn enables a freedom of interaction between individuals and also between ourselves and nature, then it does so, as Benjamin suggests, in *play*. Nevertheless, with the rise of individualism comes, also, alienated existence. And since the experience of separation from family and community gives rise to the chimera of freedom and alienation in the cultural sphere, the mimetic spread of the 'I-form' of speech represents the repetition and reproduction that is "the transformation of a shattering experience into habit."[75] This repetition and reproduction that helps to account for the spread of the 'I-form' of speech is, according to Benjamin, the essence of play. So if the emergence of individuality at first appears to threaten the stability of aura in the ancient extended family it does this only so that it can take aura, subjective agency, unto itself – so that I, the individual, might create my world. Thus the rise of the 'I-form' of speech is a self-conscious attempt to redeem the individual by asserting the primacy of the present over the past, while at the same time attempting to establish a tradition in which individuality might take over from nature as the agent of history – a project that appears doomed from its inception.

For as we distance ourselves, estrange ourselves, from the realm of nature and from one another, in so doing we "estrange the species from [ourselves]," and thereby in playing the role of individual, "turn the life of the species into a means of individual life."[76] For it is in 'play', playing at individuality, that we create this distance from nature, which

[74] Quoted in Rowland Lorimer and Paddy Scannel, *Mass Communications: A Comparative Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 139.

[75] Walter Benjamin, "Toys and Play," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 120.

[76] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 74 (Italics removed).

via the mimetic faculty reproduces the I-consciousness, the 'I-form' of speech throughout the European middle ages, modernity, and into the contemporary global world. But as soon as this transformation is complete, history grinds to a halt, for the essence of play – "imitation" – "is at home in the playing, not in the plaything."[77] It is in the nature of games, of play, that subjectivity, aura, ultimately transfers to the game once individuality ceases "ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself"[78] and assumes the role of 'player', a reification of the agency found in the process of play; in other words, this reification "makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the species,"[79] of the game. It is this abstraction that is at once foundational for the mimetic faculty, for reproduction and repetition, and at the same time undermines subjective aspirations to historical agency – the engendering of habit, of tradition. For, it can "be stated that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition."[80] Thus aura, subjectivity, accrues to the system, the apparatus, the game, in which the individual becomes a token of the authenticity of the game itself, of the mode of production.

While the individual rises up initially against the collective bondage of the ancient world, it is in play, abstraction, that she is once again enchained, all the while singing the tune of the 'I-form' of speech. For the unconscious ruse by which the individual, trickster of the modern epoch, begins to move away from traditional nature contains within itself a second trick that itself goes unnoticed at the crucial moment at which the individual feels himself to be on the verge of mastering history. As such, the individual in this hubristic state proves ripe for harvest by the machines, the machinations of capital. Thus, "the real subject of the game (this is shown precisely by those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player

[77] Walter Benjamin, "The Cultural History of Toys," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 116.

[78] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 107.

[79] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 75.

[80] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 105 (Italics removed).

in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself."[81] And insofar as the game, the mode of production is, without question, capitalism, the players – free individuals, I's – come into view as everywhere the same – alienated playthings of capital. The veil of freedom falls away: "this stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of aura [around the individual], is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness' in the world has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique,"[82] the 'here and now', the particularity of the individual.

If what remains of Hlegestr's incantation and Borkenau's story is only the self-alienation of the individual (and under contemporary capitalism, capitalism at the end of history, one is hard-pressed to make a convincing case to the contrary), then it appears that nothing remains for us except to continue playing the existing game, seeking satisfaction in our relative successes, or alternately to withdraw from it to the extent possible, a task that ultimately goes against the pleasure principle (and also the necessities of material existence) structured into playing itself. The latter course of action, moreover, seems to require us to give up the 'I-form' of speech and attempt a u-turn in the middle of the one way street of history, a course of action that generally met with disaster in the latter half of the 20th Century. However, if we wish instead to transcend our reified existence as the playthings of capital, then it seems we must return to a sense of play that continually seeks to restructure and reinvent the games we play. This would involve, at minimum (and would only just constitute a point of departure), a recognition that if the second nature in which we've become enmeshed, the game we've invented as a means by which to distance ourselves from nature proper, is a product of both material social conditions and the mimetic faculty, and not simply an attempt to master nature, then it is possible to reinterpret instrumentality, which in its current form merely seeks to carry over the impulse to master nature (mana) into our second nature. For this impulse arises of the hazy recognition that this second nature, "an abstract form

[81] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 106.

[82] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 105.

of domination," is responsible for the "increasingly fragmented character of … individual existence in that society."[83] And yet, this abstract form of domination is, more often than not, poorly recognized; thus we fumble about in the depths of the past searching for strategies to solve the challenges of the game in which we have become mere players.

At the same time, even if the 'I-form' of speech (individuality) helped propel our history toward the alienation and estrangement pervading social life under capitalism, this is ultimately a function of the way individuality must play the game of capital. In other words, the contemporary problems associated with individualism, with neoliberal individualism, arise not of the consciousness of individuals as individuals, but of individualism under capitalism. For we have reached a point in history when the individual, indeed all individuals, are the players and capitalism does the playing. This is not to say that there is no agency whatsoever for the individual, but rather, it is to make a distinction between everyday subjectivity and the socio-historical subject. Thus, the philosophy of history here reasserts its centrality as a philosophic-political concern. For while individual subjects under capital do exercise a degree of subjectivity, they remain largely alienated from socio-historical subjectivity. "Subjectivity and the socio-historical Subject, in other words, must be distinguished in [our] analysis;" this is because "the identification of the identical subject-object with determinate structures of social relations has very important implications for a theory of subjectivity."[84]

As Moishe Postone points out, "It was Marx," and, we should add, Benjamin in the cultural sphere, "who first addressed adequately the problems with which [the] modern philosophy [of history] had wrestled. [They] did so by changing the terms of those problems, grounding them socially and historically in the social [and cultural] forms of capitalism expressed by categories such as the commodity, [by play and mimesis,

[83] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 17.

[84] Moishe Postone, "Lukács and the Dialectical Critique of Capitalism," in *New Dialectics and Political Economy*, ed. Robert Albritton and John Simoulidis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 87.

and by re-production]."[85] And in so doing, Marx was able to neutralize those bourgeois concepts of socialism that sought to "identify with a social agent the concept of the identical subject-object with which Hegel," for example, "sought to overcome the subject-object dichotomy of classical epistemology."[86] This was possible because subjectivity and the agent of history have come to interact with each other, and with traditional nature, via the second nature, the game, engendered by the rise of Borkenau's 'I-consciousness'. In similar fashion to Marx, but in the sphere of culture, Benjamin was able to "neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity, genius, eternal value and mystery."[87] In so doing, the individual, the 'I' of the horn of Gallehus, ceases to stumble about in search of the firm ground of cultural authenticity, of tradition, and takes its stand elsewhere; in other words, "instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics."[88] This means that the alienated individual, no longer the subjective agent of history under capitalism, retains the ability via politics to overcome her reified contemporary existence.

For, the practice of politics takes place, like play, in the mode of repetition and reproduction. But unlike those practices founded on ritual, practices that exist 'under' rather than 'in interaction with' traditional, proper nature, practices "that culminate in human sacrifice," and whose results "are valid once and for all," politics "are wholly provisional ([they] operate by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedure)."[89] If, in the first case, the aspiration to historical subjectivity is voiced in terms of the problem of the historico-epistemological "knowing individual (or supra-individual) subject and its relation to an external (or externalized) world, to the forms of social relations, considered as determinations of social subjectivity as well as objectivity," then under the rubric of politics "the problem of knowledge now becomes a

[85] Ibid., 79.
[86] Ibid., 87.
[87] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 101.
[88] Ibid., 106 (Italics removed).
[89] Ibid., 107.

question of the relationship between forms of social mediation and forms of thought."[90] Thus the constellations between thought and mediation can be rearranged, improved via experiment and endlessly varied test procedure.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is fond of quoting Samuel Beckett: "try again, fail again, fail better."[91] This sums up what it means to understand politics as an endlessly varied test procedure. This is what it means to retain the individual 'I-form' of consciousness and still throw off the yoke of capitalist alienation. And if experiment, repetition, and reproduction – articulations of the mimetic faculty – are indeed central to contemporary human activities, then it becomes clear that we no longer need wait for the game itself to announce the time for revolution. That time is now, here at the end of history, and indeed we need only take to 'play' once again in order to grasp hold of and make real the idea that "every second," from here on out, is an opportunity, a "small gateway in time through which the [revolution] might enter."[92] Thus, praxis beckons us to gather and pay our respects to the alienated individual of history hitherto.

[90] Postone, "Lukács and the Dialectical Critique of Capitalism," 87.
[91] Samuel Beckett, "Worstward Ho," in *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 101.
[92] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

3. The Story of the Emergence of Intellect

It is well and good to call for the end of alienation in praxis, but according to some, it is, precisely, in a certain kind of praxis that alienation is constituted. According to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, the alienated individual is not simply an expression of the archetype of the seafaring traveller alienated from home, hearth, and kin. The alienated individual of history is, in addition, a function of an originary social praxis that necessarily accompanies the commodity form, a form whose rise to dominance reaches its apex with the capitalist mode of production, with the emergence of socio-economic relations governed almost completely by the 'exchange relation'. For according to Sohn-Rethel, commodity exchange, as a socially synthetic activity, conditions social relations such that they proceed in a manner best characterized as 'practical solipsism'. According to Slavoj Žižek's reading of Sohn-Rethel,

> during the act of exchange, individuals proceed as 'practical solipsists', they misrecognize the socio-synthetic function of exchange: that is the level of the 'real abstraction' as the form of socialization of private production through the medium of the market: 'what the commodity owners *do* in an exchange relation is practical solipsism – irrespective of what they think and say about it.'[1]

As such, if Franz Borkenau identifies the emergence of individualistic consciousness, Alfred Sohn-Rethel identifies one of the original practical foundations upon which it emerges and develops. No doubt, Borkenau's story grasps the constellation of conditions that give rise to the expression, in language, to Western individualistic consciousness, but Sohn-Rethel identifies one of the central practical activities of social

[1] Slavoj Žižek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," in *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), 304; The embedded quote is from Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 42.

synthesis that make such a form of consciousness, with its subsequent socio-epistemological developments, possible.

In a comment arising of an uncommon blend of philosophical and political acumen, 20th Century thinker and theorist Hannah Arendt makes the unsettling observation that "solipsism, open or veiled, with or without qualifications, has been the most persistent and, perhaps, the most pernicious fallacy of philosophy even before it attained in Descartes the high rank of theoretical and existential consistency."[2] This claim, today, has both clear exemplification and obvious ramifications well outside of what many of us have come to understand as philosophy (i.e. merely one of many autonomous disciplines of professional inquiry with its own sets of problems and methodologies). Indeed, the ramifications of such a claim resonate in the very practices of both established and emergent forms of philosophical, political, and cultural life; indeed Arendt's claim resonates throughout the tradition of Western thought as such and is buttressed by Sohn-Rethel's investigations into the emergence of abstract, alienated thought. For, solipsism is by definition the most extreme form of alienation, alienation taken to its logical end point.

But if Alfred Sohn-Rethel, in addition to Arendt, has named one of the central deceptions of the Western tradition, one can only marvel at the relative dearth of explicit and influential writing on the subject, particularly in contrast with, for example, the numerous all-but-admitted metaphysical fictions of political, philosophical, social, and economic theory: 'states of nature'; 'ideal republics'; 'social contracts'; 'the myth of barter' and the like. A very young Karl Marx provides a clue to the relative neglect of the fallacy of solipsism when he says, as we've already noted, that "for the world to become philosophic amounts to philosophy's becoming world order reality; and it means that philosophy, at the same time that it is realized, disappears."[3] Thus, as the solipsist

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 46.

[3] Quoted in Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 271; See also Marx, "Marx's Doctoral Dissertation: Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," 149.

fallacy metastasizes, spreading from the praxis of the exchange relation, then to philosophy and modern science to become socio-political, cultural, and historical cipher to the lifeworld, it assumes the general *appearance* of ontological essence and thereby, as mere philosophical fallacy, as ideology, disappears. As such, solipsism (the most extreme form of alienated individualism) comes to behave as ideology wherein, according to Slavoj Žižek, "on account of its all-pervasiveness, ideology appears as its own opposite, as non-ideology, as the core of our human identity underneath all the ideological labels."[4]

In his book, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Sohn-Rethel argues that

> the formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour, which came into existence with it.[5]

In Sohn-Rethel's account, "the reciprocal forms of appropriation in commodity exchange [lead] to the inception of intellectual labour of a kind separated from manual labour."[6] In other words, alienation is governed by the logic of appropriation. It is through the division of intellectual and manual labour, more or less complete depending on the degree to which "appropriation assumes the reciprocal form of private exchange"[7] typical in capitalism, that Sohn-Rethel links the emergence of certain types of 'knowledge', specifically the social capacity for abstract thought, with historical forms of social organization. He thus "links the rise of commodity production in [Ancient] Greece," in which commodity exchange emerges on the basis of slave trade, "with the rise of Greek philosophy."[8] As the commodity exchange relationship continues to develop toward ever

[4] Slavoj Žižek, *First As Tragedy Then As Farce* (New York: Verso Press USA, 2009), 39.
[5] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 33.
[6] Ibid., 84.
[7] Ibid., 94.
[8] Ibid., 98.

greater social prominence, abstract thought, based on the division of labour in which manual labour is, in time, made into "a living appendage of the machine"[9] of capital, continues to develop.

3.1. Sequence vs. Constellation

However, Sohn-Rethel's argument that the social practice of commodity exchange (a practice for which there is evidence going back thousands of years) gives rise to an expansion of intellectual possibilities for Western epistemology appears to pose some difficulty for my account of alienation. Indeed, for Sohn-Rethel, the history of Western thought constitutes a way of knowing that is an abstract alienated form of consciousness, one that is based on the exchange relation and the sundering of intellectual and manual labour. But Sohn-Rethel's narrative seems to require that we locate the emergence of the alienated self further back in the historical record than Borkenau's account suggests. This appears to throw the narrative arc of my thesis into confusion. This confusion, however, is the necessary result of our modern conceptions of time and history projected backward beyond the modern epoch. In other words, this confusion arises in conjunction with what Sohn-Rethel identifies as 'necessary false consciousness'[10], in conjunction, in other words, with ideology in the form of reason – with the sundering of intellectual and manual labour.

The manner by which we usually understand history, itself a form of narrative, is partly a function of our understanding of time. And our modern grasp of time, even in an everyday sense, is best characterised as abstract, empty, and homogenous. Thus, our modern conception of time conditions the manner by which we tend to approach

[9] Karl Marx, *Capital (A Critique of Political Economy)*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Penguin Classics, 1990), 614.

[10] See Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 179–199 Sohn-Rethel devotes all of chapter 40 to a discussion of the concept of "necessary false consciousness". Essentially what he is referring to is a form of thinking that is "logically correct" and "inherently incorrigible". "It is called false, not against its own standards of truth, but as against social existence." I will discuss this notion in more detail below.

historical reconstruction, or narrative; in other words, our modern tendency is, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, to "tell the sequence of [historical] events like the beads of a rosary,"[11] in successive causally sequential and formally homogenous units and sets of units, units into which the contents of history must be made to fit. As a result, if we propose to tell the Marxian story of alienation in the West, "the tripartite story – going out-from-self, expansion of possibilities in externality, [and] return from alienation to self at a higher level,"[12] there is a tendency to impose our modern logic of time, its formal logic, on the story itself. We expect to see that 'going-out-from-self' sequentially precedes the 'expansion of possibilities in externality' which is in turn followed by the 'return from alienation to self at a higher level'. The formal homogeneity of our modern notion of time thus tends to confuse and discredit non-sequential historical narrative.

As such, in debates over the centrality of market relations in the emergence of capitalism, for example, a common objection to certain kinds of Marxist discourse tends to argue that markets were present well in advance of the emergence of capitalist social relations.[13] This objection is meant to show that markets do indeed respond, on the one hand, to a natural and/or universal human impulse. On the other hand, this objection is meant to show that exploitation under capitalism is not essential, but rather that exploitative social relations are eternal (at least thus far) and only contingently related to the capitalist mode of production which, it is argued, tends to ameliorate the worst

[11] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

[12] Angus, "Walking on Two Legs," 341.

[13] Non-Marxist critiques often proceed via Adam Smith's position that it is a component of human nature to "truck, barter, and exchange." See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1 (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1910), 15; For a compelling critique of what he calls "traditional Marxism" see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* Here Postone clearly identifies what he takes to be some of the central problems associated with Marxist critiques of capitalism that proceed via a critique of markets and private property from the standpoint of a transhistorical concept of labour. Postone's work addresses many common liberal and "post-marxist" critiques of the Marxian project. However, based on a sophisticated reinterpretation of Marx's work, Postone manages to do so while articulating a very compelling critique of capitalism that appears to salvage much of the Marxian critique of Alienation. In addition, for what I take to be a very good critique of what he calls "the myth of barter", a critique that has critical implications for claims concerning the relation between markets and 'human nature' see David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House, 2011), chap. 2.

human tendencies toward exploitation. As a result, market based social relations *appear* as a latent socio-historical universal, a constitutive element of society that responds to aspects of human nature, rather than a historical contingency that could in theory disappear. And this is taken to exonerate the capitalist mode of production from claims made by some Marxists to the effect that overcoming market relations is possible, desirable, and should be the basis for social organization, as was the case in the former Soviet Union. At the same time, if it can be shown that the exploitative social relations that seem to accompany capitalist production are merely the accidental result of poor methodological implementation of the theoretical precepts of market capitalism or of some other extraneous social factor, then it seems to follow that the Marxist critique of capitalism is misguided, based on a misconstrual of the historical facts, or at best superfluous. Thus, the Marxist critique of bourgeois political economy can be taken to have been 'falsified', in the sense in which Karl Popper famously used the term.[14]

However, the Marxian rejoinder to this kind of critique is to concede that markets did indeed exist prior to the emergence of capitalism, but to then also point out that in pre-capitalist societies markets did not occupy the central socially synthetic position that they do with the emergence of capitalist production. In other words, the Marxian response is not to argue that capitalism's key features consist of the emergence of absolutely new mechanisms of social synthesis (or mediation), but to argue instead that it is the configuration of social mechanisms (such as markets, private property, systems of government, technology, culture, class relations, etc.) under capitalism that is historically unprecedented. Thus, the capitalist mode of production, understood in this way, is not simply the result of temporally sequential and causally determining developments in technology, culture, or political economy, but rather the result of a realignment, or rather a reordered constellation of social factors which, when arranged in a certain way, give rise to capitalism. In a similar way, the story of alienation draws on elements that belong to the prehistory of modern alienation – in this case, on Borkenau's

[14] See Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper TorchBooks, 1968).

theory of the emergence of individual consciousness and on Sohn Rethel's assertion that modern thought (which includes science) is based on the division of labour that accompanies the rise of the commodity form. But it is with a certain relational alignment of these elements that the Marxian story of alienation emerges as coherent. In the absence of the mediating work of narrative synthesis, the components of the story of alienation remain as mere unmediated elements, elements that appear historically unrelated when considered under the aetiological rubric of abstract time.

3.2. Abstract Time and Metaphor

Capitalism as a system and as a concept can be understood in light of the "etymological meaning of 'metaphor' as transfer,"[15] wherein the relation between elements of a metaphor enables a transfer of meaning between ideas such that each of the elements in question reveal themselves in relation to the other(s) in ways that both change the meaning of the elements themselves and also give rise to a new synthesis. This is a way of saying that in addition to the new layers of meaning revealed in the elements of a metaphor by virtue of their being arranged in relation to one another, there is also the meaning of the metaphor grasped as a whole. Thus, "capitalism itself is a metaphor, an alienating process which displaces life from subject to object, from use-value to exchange-value, from the human to the monstrous."[16] And the elements of this metaphor, or in this case the elements of the story of alienation I tell here, need not be made to fit into a narrative structure organized according to abstract time. For this requirement would entail that we adhere to the axioms of abstract metaphysical thought, precisely that form of thought that we wish to criticize. Moreover, to attempt to tell the story of alienation while respecting the requirements of an abstract conception of time would entail telling several separate stories as if they were, from their beginning, the same story, which is not, strictly speaking, the case. Rather, once the elements of the

[15] Francis Wheen, *Marx's Das Kapital: A Biography* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007), 80.
[16] Ibid., 80–81.

alienation narrative are established and brought into relation with one another they become, like a metaphor, part of the same whole. But since the emergence of Western individualism and the emergence of Western epistemology have different, though in hindsight complimentary, origins, a strict adherence to the formal requirements of abstract time will not suffice. Rather, the modern emergence of alienation is a story that must be told in concrete time; that is, modern alienation itself marks the time in which the narrative takes place. As such, we shall have to elaborate on the distinction between abstract and concrete time, which will in turn lay some of the groundwork for our ensuing discussion of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's critique of Western epistemology.

The distinction between abstract and concrete time is well-characterized by Moishe Postone when he differentiates between time as a dependant variable in contrast with time as an independent variable. The commonplace distinction between notions of time as linear progression versus notions that conceive time as cyclical don't help to explain the abstract, empty, and homogenous nature of modern time since both linear and cyclical notions of temporal flux are equally open to concrete renderings. In other words, "concrete time is a broader category than is cyclical [or linear] time, for there are linear conceptions of time which are essentially concrete, such as the Jewish notion of history, defined by the Exodus, the Exile, and the coming of the Messiah, or the Christian conception in terms of the Fall, the Crucifixion, and the Second Coming."[17] Thus, concrete time is based on the notion of time as a dependent variable, always attached to the varying duration of events. It is "referred to, and understood through, natural cycles and the periodicities of human life as well as particular tasks or processes, for example, the time required to cook rice or to say one *paternoster*."[18]

In contrast, abstract time is best conceived as an independent variable. In this account, phenomena are a function of time, as opposed to concrete time wherein the reverse is true.

[17] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 201.
[18] Ibid.

> [Abstract time] is independent of events. The conception of abstract time, which became increasingly dominant 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 equably without relation to anything external.' Abstract time ... constitutes an independent framework within which motion, events, and action occur. Such time is divisible into equal, constant, nonqualitative units.[19]

Moreover, the structuring of our contemporary understanding of time, and by extension our understanding of history, in accord with the postulates of abstract time is a social phenomenon. It is not, as one might think, the result of advances in technology that enable the calculation of time based on uniform processes for measurement. Rather as Postone points out,

> various kinds of water clocks were used in Hellenistic and in Roman society and were widespread in both Europe and in Asia. What is significant for our purposes is the fact that, although water clocks operated on the basis of roughly uniform processes – the flow of water – they were used to indicate variable hours.[20]

In other words, methods of keeping time that would have been well-suited, technologically speaking, to the measurement of abstract time were constructed specifically in keeping with the requirements of "modes of reckoning associated with concrete time."[21] Thus, what we can infer here is that only once abstract modes of social synthesis – and by extension abstract modes of thought – come to occupy a centrally organizing social role does technology begin to operate in the manner we have come to expect, as an essential force in modern becoming.

[19] Ibid., 202.
[20] Ibid., 203–204.
[21] Ibid., 201.

3.3. Abstract Reality

We may ask, then, why abstract time became socially hegemonic. According to Postone, "the historical origins of the conception of abstract time should be seen in terms of the constitution of the social reality of such time with the spread of the commodity-determined form of social relations."[22] Indeed, this is precisely the explanation for the emergence of abstract phenomena of consciousness that Sohn-Rethel endorses. When Postone identifies the spread of commodity-determined social relations as the decisive element in bringing abstract time to a position in which it structures consciousness, he is identifying social action, praxis, as decisive. As Sohn-Rethel points out, the act of commodity exchange is doubly abstract, and thus doubly alienating. First, Sohn-Rethel points out that where commodities are concerned,

> use and exchange are not only different and contrasting by description, but are mutually exclusive in time. They must take place separately at different times. This is because exchange serves only a change of ownership, a change, that is, in terms of a purely *social status* of the commodities as owned property. In order to make this change possible on a basis of negotiated agreement the physical condition of the commodities, their *marital status*, must remain unchanged, or at any rate, must be assumed to remain unchanged. Commodity exchange cannot take place as a recognized social institution unless this separation of exchange from use is stringently observed.[23]

This is not to say that exchange is the only reason for which the use of things can be halted. But what is important, according to Sohn-Rethel, is that where commodity exchange is concerned use is "forbidden by social command or necessity."[24]

Indeed "the salient feature of the act of exchange is that its separation from use has assumed the compelling necessity of an objective social law;" moreover, "wherever commodity exchange takes place, it does so in effective abstraction from use. This is an

[22] Ibid., 202.
[23] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 23–24.
[24] Ibid., 24.

abstraction not in mind, but in fact."[25] In addition, though we have become used to thinking of abstraction as a function of the intellect, where commodity exchange is concerned, concrete considerations of use are banished to the private realm of the minds of those involved in exchange. "It is the action of exchange, and the action alone, that is abstract. The consciousness and the action of people part company in exchange and go different ways. ... Buyers and sellers of sodium chlorate may have gardening in mind or bomb-making."[26] Moreover, "the actions of exchange [themselves] are reduced to strict uniformity, eliminating the differences of people, commodities, locality and date."[27] Thus, in addition to the separation of use and exchange, those who enter into the exchange relationship are, according to Sohn-Rethel, alienated from one another in terms of their individuality and humanity.

At the same time, it is the exchange relationship, based on the exchange of commodities, that while alienating, is also productive for Western epistemology. As Marx has pointed out the exchange of commodities involves abstraction insofar as it becomes necessary to determine equivalencies between objects that are qualitatively different. Marx thus turns to the quantity of abstract labour contained in commodities as a universal determinant of value. However, in addition, Sohn-Rethel points out that

> the interrelational equation posited by an act of exchange leaves all dimensional measurements behind and establishes a sphere of non-dimensional quantity. ... In other words, the postulate of the exchange equation abstracts quantity in a manner which constitutes the foundation of free mathematical reasoning.[28]

In addition, the "abstraction of pure quantity gains in importance by its association with a corresponding abstraction occurring to time and space when they apply to acts of

[25] Ibid., 25.
[26] Ibid., 26.
[27] Ibid., 30.
[28] Ibid., 47.

exchange instead of to acts of use."[29] While it seems obvious that in our use relationships with things and with nature, time and space are always inextricably bound up with our activity, what is not so obvious is the manner by which concrete space and time are effectively banished from the activity of exchange where commodities are concerned. Yet indeed, the commodity, while bound up in the exchange relation, must leave behind that which Walter Benjamin claims the technologically reproduced work of art (in modern industrial production) never had to begin with, namely "its presence in time and space."[30] Thus, "time and space rendered abstract under the impact of commodity exchange are marked by homogeneity, continuity, and emptiness of all natural and material content, visible or invisible (e.g. air)."[31] It is now clear that according to Sohn-Rethel's account of the commodity, whilst the commodity is under the aegis of exchange it is not only itself alienated but renders time and space abstract in their alienation from use. And this occurs in precisely the way that Postone suggests that abstract time becomes hegemonic, under generalized social relations conditioned by commodity exchange.

All the same, these abstractions do prove productive. Sohn-Rethel points out that when Galileo began to articulate a science of dynamics and, in response to problems concerning ballistics and cannonballs, "brought to bear his concept of inertial movement," the solution to the problem was found via "an exercise of pure mathematical analysis consisting of the combination of two geometrical principles, that of a straight line with a horizontal or an upward tilt and that of a vertical fall involving an even acceleration of known arithmetical measure."[32] However, Sohn-Rethel goes on to argue, on the basis of Alexandre Koyré's work, that Galileo's concept of inertial motion is a form of pure philosophy based on no possible observation of material reality. In short, it is an approximation of a Kantian synthetic a priori idea. Indeed Sohn-Rethel does concede the

[29] Ibid., 48.

[30] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Shocken Books, 2007), 220.

[31] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 48.

[32] Ibid., 124.

importance of Galileo's work as a vehicle by which "mathematics can establish itself as an instrument of analysis of given phenomena of movement and yield a mathematical hypothesis which can then be tested experimentally."[33] Nevertheless, Sohn-Rethel's explanation of Galileo's

> principle of inertial motion is that it derives from the pattern of motion contained in the real abstraction of commodity exchange. This motion has the reality in time and space of the commodity movements in the market, and thus of the circulation of money and capital. The pattern is absolutely abstract, in the sense of bearing no shred of perceptible qualities, and was defined as: abstract linear movement through abstract, empty, continuous and homogeneous space and time of abstract substances which thereby suffer no material change, the movement being amenable to nothing other than mathematical treatment.[34]

Thus Sohn-Rethel has established what appears to be an essential homology between the necessary epistemological conditions for exchange and the necessary conditions for the emergence of abstract thought.

It might be objected at this point that Sohn-Rethel has made the same mistakes that Franz Borkenau made in his early work commissioned by the Frankfurt School. In that work, Borkenau contended that "modern mechanics dated from the middle of the seventeenth century and could be explained in terms of the emerging division of labour in manufacturing."[35] Henryk Grossman, according to Rick Kuhn, would later demolish this theory, pointing out in his research that "mechanics was developed in the fifteenth century, while manufacturing emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century."[36] However, we need to bear in mind that unlike Borkenau's early research, Sohn-Rethel's position is not that scientific rationality is conditioned by, or rather is a reflection of the organization and division of labour (though this plays a role), but rather that it is the

[33] Ibid., 127.

[34] Ibid., 128.

[35] Rick Kuhn, *Henryk Grossman and the Recovery of Marxism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 165.

[36] Ibid.

exchange relation, understood as socially synthetic praxis in societies of appropriation, that is the intellectually generative activity.

3.4. Abstraction and Alienation

Despite the fact that the emergence of abstract intellectual labour has yielded astounding techno-scientific results, it has also produced conditions under which "human labour is coerced into complete technological combination."[37] As Marx pointed out in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the system of exchange upon which the sundering of intellectual and manual labour is based produces

> wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines – but some of the workers it throws back to a barbarous type of labour, and the other workers it turns into machines. It produces *intelligence* – but for the worker *idiocy, cretinism.*[38]

How, one wonders, is it possible that along with such a great flowering of the intellect there can be such a complete immiseration of the conditions of manual labour? Only with the nearly complete alienation of manual and intellectual labour brought about by commodity exchange, according to Sohn-Rethel.

If, as Sohn-Rethel suggests, under social conditions in which abstract commodity exchange was not yet dominant "the social practice was rational," in the sense that manual and intellectual labour were not yet alienated, "but the theory was irrational (mythological and anthropomorphic)," then with the rise to dominance of the alienation in exchange relations the reverse is true: "the social practice has turned irrational (out of

[37] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 162.
[38] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 71 (Italics added).

man's [sic] control) but his mode of thinking has assumed rational forms."[39] In other words, according to Sohn-Rethel,

> capital is a social power which takes over production where it has outgrown the economic and technological capacities of the direct producer controlling it himself. While in the economic field the social power is capital, in the field of technology it is science, or, more accurately, the methodical operation of the human mind in its socialised form, guided by its specific logic, which is mathematics. This socialised mind of man, we have seen, is money without its material attachments, therefore immaterial and no longer recognisable as money and, indeed no longer being money but the 'pure intellect'. In its form as money it is capital ruling the labour process by the identity of labour with value and postulating the process to be cast in a framework in which it operates in an automatic manner enforcing the embodiment of the labour employed into values containing a surplus. In its form as the scientific intellect the socialised mind applies itself to physical phenomena on which the automatic working of the labour process of the various capitals is found to be depending.[40]

Thus, for Sohn-Rethel, so long as we remain practical solipsists, so long as the exchange relation remains the central and dominant form of social praxis, consciousness must remain abstract and in opposition to material labour. Moreover, the alienation expressed in the rupture between intellectual and manual labour must also remain impassable, with social practice remaining irrationally subject to reified/reifying, albeit rational consciousness.

In principle, however, insofar as social praxis governed by the logic of appropriation, the very logic that according to Sohn-Rethel governs our current epoch, can be overcome, alienation – the division between intellectual and manual labour – can also be overcome. In short, Sohn-Rethel's position is that "intellectual labour divided from manual labour is ruled by a logic of appropriation. Socialism, however, demands a mode of thinking in accordance with a logic of production."[41] In other words, thinking and

[39] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 133–134.
[40] Ibid., 130.
[41] Ibid., 139.

productive action must be brought together. Socialism, for Sohn-Rethel, "implies thinking by the direct producers themselves and it would necessitate the unity of head and hand."[42] Thus, the further continuing of science and technology, but based on a mode of social synthesis, of socialized (planned) labour rather than exchange, can, in Sohn-Rethel's estimation, bring about a classless society – the negation of capitalism. One need not, according to Sohn-Rethel, do away with 'capitalist technicism', but instead as Kōstas Axelos will argue, the end of alienation is to be sought in the 'high development of technique':

> The achievement of socialism does not necessitate scrapping the means of capitalist production to replace them by socialist means. To recognize, with Marx, the potentialities of emancipation in the capitalist machinery means, however much this machinery incorporates the rule of capital over labour, it can be transformed into means of production for socialism once the revolutionary power of the working class has broken the power of capital.[43]

This transformation must, by implication, proceed via the producing class (the working proletariat) taking hold of the rationality of the modern intellect in action, in praxis, in technique. In Sohn-Rethel's account, it is only in this way that theory can be made truly rational with respect to social practice.

For, insofar as intellectual and manual labour remain alienated, the totality of being remains shot through with the fractures and fissures characteristic of modern existence. Indeed, for all our modern intellectual rationality, even consciousness itself remains false, necessarily false according to Sohn-Rethel. In other words, intellectual labour itself remains alienated, not just from manual labour but from the broader sphere of intellectual activity:

> The encyclopedia of the sciences, the total system of scientific knowledge, absolute science – none of these has reached full constitution. Knowledge remains divided and splintered, each scientific

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 177.

> worker deeming his discipline and his method the single true one by which he judges all the others, while at the same time not taking the trouble to relate his particular truth to even that restricted reality that corresponds to it. Isolated individuals live in "atomistic" society, unable in any way to complete the edifice of science. No doubt scientific progress has been achieved, resulting, in general, in a partial transcending of the watertight compartments that separate scientists. But the results remain meagre.[44]

And the problem is not just that the results remain meagre, but that so long as they remain alienated, they also remain necessarily false, ideological. For ideology is merely a part of the broader theory of alienation.[45]

In contrast with the critique of 'false consciousness', understood in the weak sense, wherein the implication is that there is "some unequivocally correct way of viewing the world," which leads to the idea that "a minority of theorists monopolize a scientifically grounded knowledge of how society is, while the rest of us blunder around in some fog of false consciousness,"[46] Sohn-Rethel makes use of the idea of necessary false consciousness. Necessary false consciousness is false, but not merely faulty, which is what makes it so ideologically powerful. It is systematically rigorous, historically conditioned, and conditioned to be false by necessity, by the logical necessity involved in social praxis centered around the exchange relation, which is what makes it useful in class struggle. Specifically, 'necessary false consciousness' is false "not against its own standards of truth, but against social existence." Thus, "its falseness cannot be straightened out by means of logic and by conceptual adjustments."[47] If this were the case, we would be dealing with a timeless conception of truth. And under these circumstances "idealism is the only consistent standpoint of thinking. If the truth is timeless the spatio-temporal world cannot ultimately be real."[48] Thus, historical

[44] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 210.
[45] Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1996), 70.
[46] Ibid., 11.
[47] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 197.
[48] Ibid., 200.

materialism, which holds truth to be contingent, must be called to account for itself in the face of idealism and its claim to eternal truth.

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote that truth is "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people."[49] His point is that 'truth' is anything but eternal and that there are numerous reasons for the common belief in eternal truth: "truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins."[50] And just as there are contingent reasons for the belief in eternal truths, there are "timebound causes for timeless logic."[51] According to Sohn-Rethel the timeless logic of the sciences, the fruit of the expansion of possibilities in externality derived from the alienation narrative, is "based on abstraction from our own timebound existential condition," or rather, "on the abstraction of society from itself."[52] The strength of this position is that it is able to provide an explanation for timeless logic on the basis of lived sensuous existence. By contrast, timeless logic, idealism, is unable to refer to anything outside of itself without sacrificing logical consistency. What then remains is to pierce the idealist armour of contemporary capital in order to compel recognition, recognition that capitalism itself is a 'worn out metaphor' whose time has come.

[49] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1977), 46–47.

[50] Ibid., 47.

[51] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 201.

[52] Ibid.

4. The Story of Techno-Science and the Return to Self: Technology as the ground of Alienation and Transcendence

Karl Marx, according to Kōstas Axelos, belongs "to the era when [the sciences], meaning techno-scientific activities of an economic, historical, political, biological, [and] psychological nature are replacing philosophy."[1] Yet even while philosophy splinters and immerges into the rising tide of the manifold techno-scientific disciplines, the sciences maintain a degree of interconnection, of intersection, and these points of intersection continue to multiply at an increasing rate. Indeed, "the sciences have been intersecting in all organizational forms of modern life: in industry, in commerce, in education, in politics, in warfare, in journalism of all kinds."[2] As such, the fragmentation and dissolution of philosophy, a phenomenon that according to Kōstas Axelos heralds its other – a reconciliation of sorts – is under way, though far from accomplished. According to Axelos, what is lost, as philosophy gives way to the sciences, is thinking. For, "the sciences produce rather than think. They operate and transform *techno*-scientifically."[3] However, they have hitherto done so, and even now do so, only in an alienated way:

> The sciences remain divided into the *natural sciences* and the *sciences of human history*. It is an alienating division, for man [sic] is never involved with nature as something outside history or with a history independent of nature. There is not one basis for science and another for life; this scission is introduced by alienation, and with it science takes leave of the

[1] Kōstas Axelos, "Marx, Freud, and the Undertakings of Thought in the Future," *Diogenes* 18, no. 72 (December 1, 1970): 98.

[2] Martin Heidegger, "Science and Reflection," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Toronto: Harper and Row, 1977), 157.

[3] Kōstas Axelos, "Play as the System of Systems," *Sub Stance* Vol. 8, no. 4 (1979): 21.

> terrain upon which it rises and which ought to be its foundation, namely, the sensuous activity of men.[4]

At the same time, it is the kernel of rationality in the sciences, their productive essence, which represents, according to Axelos' reading of Marx, the potentiality for the overcoming of alienation in praxis. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel has noted, with the advent of the modern epoch, our "social practice has turned irrational (out of man's [sic] control) but [our] mode of thinking has assumed rational forms,"[5] though the process leading to this state of affairs has, for Sohn-Rethel, been under way at least since the emergence of Greek philosophy. Overcoming alienation thus appears, metaphysically, to involve extending the rationality of the sciences, of techno-science, into the social sphere, unless we understand social practice and technical practice as irreparably separate spheres of activity.

Moreover, because it is the essence of the sciences, of techno-science, to produce, to operate and transform, and ultimately, according to Axelos, to recombine a fractured world, he reads in Marx the notion that "the first real premise, the first practical condition for the radical abolition of private property and every alienation, lies in the great increase of productive forces, the high development of technique."[6] Thus, while the

[4] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 211.

[5] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 134.

[6] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 247. Interestingly, Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan, appeared to advance a similar kind of claim when he said that "the restructuring of human work and association was shaped by the technique of fragmentation that is the essence of machine technology. The essence of automation technology is the opposite. It is integral and decentralist in depth, just as the machine was fragmentary, centralist, and superficial in its patterning of human relationships."; See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964), 8. However, where Axelos' Heideggerian reading of technology appears to differ from McLuhan's is in the fact that Axelos and Heidegger read technology as essentially historical/epochal in contrast with McLuhan's apparent confusion of the message for the medium where technology and history are concerned. Indeed, Arthur Kroker appears to make a similar point when he says that one of McLuhan's blind spots was, from the outset of his thinking, to have "already embraced, from its very beginnings, the deepest assumptions of technological society." See Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1996), 80.

development of technique, in Axelos' reading of Marx, expresses and aggravates the alienated condition of modern human existence, it is at once the development of technique that expresses the possibility of, the potentiality for, overcoming this very condition. The question of technique, of technology, is thus, for Axelos, one of the *open questions* in Marxian thought, one of the fissures in Marxism through which alienated human existence might escape itself, transcend itself, immanently, via its essential powers, via the forces of production.

As Bertell Ollman points out, when Marx "refers to industry … he means the forces of production."[7] Thus Axelos can say that for Marx technique is "the motor of the historical development of mankind." This is because Axelos reads *industry* in Marx's thought as "technique's most highly developed form."[8] For Marx does indeed appear to regard industry "as the *exoteric* revelation of man's *essential powers.*"[9] And in Axelos' reading of Marx, our essential powers must be understood in terms of our capacity for productive labour. And moreover, nothing is more certain than the fact that technology and the sciences have come to play a central role in modern industrial production. As such, techno-science manifested exoterically as industry does, in the final analysis, appear to be of central importance for the abolition of alienation, even though industry and science remain estranged in the socio-metaphysical duality of manual and intellectual labour respectively. But at the same time, according to Axelos, Marx's *thought* remains essentially metaphysical, alienated, which is another way of saying that it remains ideological – that is, necessarily false, at least for the moment. And it is in the theory of alienation, according to Axelos, that Marx's metaphysical commitments are most clearly exposed:

> According to Marx, all human history has been the history of alienation, with nothing preceding alienation historically or ontically. What was alienated was the social nature of man. The issue is, therefore, to recover that nature lost from its first appearance, but the movement of reconquest

[7] Ollman, *Alienation*, 142.
[8] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 212.
[9] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 110.

> is something absolutely new and without precedent. This premise for reconciliation is "metaphysical," for the nature in question precedes all experience, but its accomplishment is to be physical, human, and historical.[10]

This means that for Axelos Marx's theory of alienation never extricates itself from the metaphysical duality, the alienated abstract thought, which counterposes intellectual rationality to sensuous, material reality. In other words, Axelos appears to accuse Marx of grounding the transcendence of alienation somewhere between the subjective human *will* and the whims of fate dictated by a reified world.[11]

István Mészáros, in his work on the history of the concept of alienation, outlines a similar, albeit more pronounced, difficulty in the work of French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to Mészáros, "Rousseau denounces alienation in many of its manifestations," however, "the fundamental contradiction in Rousseau's thought lies in his incommensurably sharp perception of the *phenomena of alienation* and the glorification of their *ultimate cause*."[12] Here we should take care to note that Marx emphatically avoids glorifying the 'ultimate cause' of alienation in the same way that Rousseau, on Mészáros' account, seems to do so. For according to Mészáros, "what Rousseau opposes is not the alienating power of money and property as such," a phenomenon that Marx explicitly does oppose, "but a particular mode of their realization in the form of *concentration* of wealth."[13] This is what leads Rousseau to seek for the overcoming of alienation – alienation read as partiality which, in Rousseau's parlance, is the tendency of the *particular will* – in the abstract realm of morality, the realm in which his idealization of civil society rendered in terms of the *general will* arises. "For while the particular will's tendency towards partiality is an ontological reality, the 'general will's tendency to equality' is, in the given historical situation, a mere

[10] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 241.
[11] Ibid., 267.
[12] Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 52.
[13] Ibid., 59.

postulate."[14] And herein lies the similarity between Marx and Rousseau, the essential kinship between two great modern thinkers: their affinity, at least in Axelos and Mészáros' respective readings, lies in the fact that their premises for transcending alienation – morality for Rousseau and technology-in-history for Marx – leave them in the lurch, so to speak.

As Mészáros points out, it is because Rousseau's general will is a mere postulate that "only a further moral postulate can 'transcend' the actual, ontological 'is' and the moral 'ought' of an equality inherent in the 'general will'."[15] For Rousseau, this transcendence takes place in the sphere of law, underwritten by property.

> The ultimate premises of Rousseau's thought determine the concrete articulation of his system and set the limits to his understanding of the problematics of alienation. He recognizes that law is made for the protection of private property and that everything else in the order of "civil society"—including "civil liberty"—rests on such a foundation. Since, however, he cannot go beyond the horizon of this idealized civil society, he must maintain not only that the law is made for the benefit of private property but also that private property is made for the benefit of the law as its sole guarantee. Thus the circle is irrevocably closed; there can be no escape from it. Only those features of alienation can be noticed which are in agreement with the ultimate premises of Rousseau's system. Since private property is taken for granted as the absolute condition of civilized life, only its form of distribution is allowed to be queried, the complex problematics of alienation cannot be grasped at its *roots* but only in some of its *manifestations*.[16]

Axelos' Heideggerian reading of Marx, in which modern technology, techno-scientific industry, structures the manner by which we become conscious of our historical trajectory (the manner by which the essence of our modern relation to *Being* is *revealed*, if we choose to make use of Heidegger's idiom), of being-in-becoming, attempts to identify the way in which Marx's thought, indeed western metaphysical thought in

[14] Ibid., 53.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 58.

general, falls prey to a similar baselessness as that identified by Mészáros in his reading of Rousseau.

For if the 'ultimate premises of Rousseau's thought determine the concrete articulation of his system and set the limits to his understanding of the problematics of alienation', is this not also true for Marx's understanding of the problematics of the *transcendence* of alienation? If, for Rousseau, 'the complex problematics of alienation cannot be grasped at its *roots* but only in some of its *manifestations*', does Marx not stand equally guilty of the same shortcoming where *transcendence* is at issue? Indeed, this appears to be Axelos' claim. And Mészáros seems to admit as much when he says that overcoming alienation involves mediation "between the *present and future* states of society,"[17] though he stops short of extending this insight along the critical path taken by Axelos. Nevertheless, Axelos does claim that it is in the essence of technique that mediation between the present (ontological is) and the future (historical ought) might be sought, even if this seeking, at first, continues to grope about in the realm of metaphysics.

According to Axelos, once philosophy exhausts its energy in the pre-modern era, techno-science usurps the position formerly occupied by philosophy, formerly occupied by thinking; but thinking, though dethroned, continues to wander along a number of disparate paths. We can, according to Axelos, take on the "difficulties of existence," political, economic, and ideological alienation, etc., "by listening to [their] calls, by thinking about [them] through a cunning, supple, and coherent, though baseless type of thought which accepts the joining of opposites. This is the path of Heraclitus, Hegel-Marx, and Nietzsche."[18] Alternatively, "the quest for being can be continued through a type of thought which can conceive itself forgotten and cancelled, this cancellation cancelling itself in turn []. … This is the path traced by Parmenides, Plato, Kant, and

[17] Ibid., 128.
[18] Axelos, "Play as the System of Systems," 23.

Heidegger."[19] Thus metaphysical thinking, philosophy, lives on, through modernity, in varied processes of half-life, so to speak. And in the Marxian tradition, according to Axelos, thinking attempts to bring to fruition the essence of technique while at once forgetting and cancelling that essence in its modern form, that essence which is, and has hitherto been, metaphysical. Or rather, as Axelos once put it in a 2006 interview, "Marx considered technique as a driving force; however, he failed in conceiving its remote origin and its dominance over his own thought and action as well."[20] Thus Axelos reads Marx in order to uncover Marx's insights into the essence of technology (techno-science), even if those insights remain latent, just below the conscious surface of Marx's explicit and articulate thought.

4.1. The Essence of Techno-Science and the Marx-Heidegger connection

According to Ian Angus, "the idea of techno-science is based on the integration of technology and science [through] the model of cybernetics that goes back to Martin Heidegger's groundbreaking essay 'The Question Concerning Technology'."[21] And it is with this idea (techno-science) in mind that Axelos claims that "the greatness of Marx's thinking is to be sought in his grasp of the *movement of technique*."[22] In other words, Axelos, without ever explicitly tying his reading of Marx to Heidegger's insights into the movement of technique, explores what appears to be a fundamental homology between Marx and Heidegger's ontologies in terms of their relation to technology. And he has good reasons for doing so. At the same time, we do well to keep in mind that Axelos' position on Marx's ontology is that "there is no ontology in Marx, no first philosophy,

[19] Ibid. In the note accompanying these two observations Axelos, furthermore, claims that "it goes without saying that [these two possibilities for the continuation of 'thinking'] are related."

[20] Christos Memos, "For Marx and Marxism: An Interview With Kōstas Axelos," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 98 (August 2009): 135.

[21] Ian Angus, *Love the Questions*, Semaphore Series. (Winnipeg, MB.: Arbeiter Ring Pub, 2009), 146.

[22] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 295.

either spiritualistic or materialistic;" for according to Axelos, "Marx rejects precisely all ontology and metaphysics, though he is unable to divest himself of a kind of implicit 'ontology' and succeeds only in rejecting metaphysics in realizing it – 'metaphysically?' – in technique."[23] This claim appears to justify the manner by which Axelos reads Heidegger and Marx together, while consigning Marx's thinking to the history of metaphysics, or what Heidegger would have referred to as the forgetting of Being.

When Heidegger identifies one of the essential realms of technology as "a way of revealing," and furthermore claims that "the possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing,"[24] he is working the same ground as Marx.[25] And when Heidegger then says that technique understood as "*revealing* gathers together in advance the aspect and the matter of, [for example], ship or house, with a view to the finished thing envisioned as completed, and from this gathering determines the manner of its construction,"[26] he appears to be arguing in harmony with Marx (and also, arguably, Aristotle). For, Marx, in outlining his 'ontology' of labour says that "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."[27] In other words, Marx is saying that in labouring we gather the aspects (gathering the 'matter' is implied in construction) of a thing – for example, a ship, a house, or a cell – with a view to its finished construction and, as Heidegger says above, 'this gathering determines the manner of the thing's construction'. Thus,

[23] Ibid., 289.

[24] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 12. (Italics added).

[25] Marx also, in fact, says that "technology *reveals* the relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations." See Karl Marx, *Capital (A Critique of Political Economy)*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Penguin Classics, 1990), 493 n. 4.(Italics added).

[26] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 13.

[27] Marx, *Capital (A Critique of Political Economy)*, 1:284.; Marx also says something very similar when he argues that "if it is clear that production offers consumption its external object, it is therefore equally clear that consumption ideally posits the object of production as an internal image, as a need, as a drive and as a purpose. It creates the objects of production in a still subjective form." See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2005), 91–92.

because, in addition, we do not simply reproduce nature, but instead actively work to change the ontological 'is' of existence to suit our specifically human (and historically contingent) needs, labour comes to appear as technology, and in the modern epoch it comes to appear as productive techno-science. Moreover, under the aegis of modernity (or capitalism), technology itself comes to appear as a *particular* mode of revealing, a mode that "refers to a new configuration of practical activity through technical innovation and a theoretical perspective on the world as a whole."[28] Because Heidegger and Marx each saw technology "as a 'mode of revealing', [they] thereby broke down the separation between science and technology."[29]

However, this is where Marx and Heidegger's projects appear to part company. For Heidegger saw the Western metaphysical tradition, with its conceptual emphasis on dualities such as the subject/object relation, as limiting. He thus attempted "to think the Western metaphysical tradition as a whole without being limited to its latest stage, the stage in which, of course, he himself [was] situated."[30] And the method by which he undertook his project was "by a strict abstention from the forms of thought and language of the tradition."[31] In other words, Heidegger seeks, as Rousseau (and also by implication Marx) did not, to surmount the conceptual apparatuses that (recalling Mészáros' critique of Rousseau) have come to serve as the ultimate premises of the Western metaphysical tradition, premises that determine the concrete articulation(s) of the system(s) of Western thought, systems that set the limits to understanding the problematics of the metaphysical tradition in general and, for our purposes, the problematics of alienation in particular.

> Consider terms [in Heidegger's work] such as "revealing" and "concealing." Clearly they are substitutes for traditional concepts such as consciousness and experience which Heidegger rejects as loaded with unacceptable baggage. The concepts of the tradition, such as subject and

[28] Angus, *Love the Questions*, 146–147.
[29] Ibid., 147.
[30] Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of Technology*, 22.
[31] Ibid.

> object, value and fact, can no longer supply the explanations but have become the explananda.[32]

By doing away with the traditional conceptual framework of subject and object, for example, Heidegger is able to break down "the separation between science and technology in order to see technology not as an *application* of science but as a force in the production of knowledge."[33] In contrast, when Marx says that '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', he appears to be operating within the traditional framework of subject and object. Thus, by implication, Marx's theory seems to get caught up in the idea that technology is an application of science, thereby inadvertently reinforcing the division between intellectual and manual labour that he struggles to overcome.[34]

Perhaps even more damaging, according to Heidegger, is that insofar as we remain in the province of metaphysics we never move beyond an understanding of technology as an application of science, beyond an understanding of manual labour as an application of intellectual rationality. In failing to overcome the alienating mode of thinking that is metaphysics (one expression of which emerges in the division between abstract and concrete, intellectual and manual labour) we remain barred from establishing what Heidegger might refer to as an authentic relation between human existence and Being, *Dasein* – in other words; we misconstrue the essential worth of humankind. According to Heidegger,

[32] Ibid., 23.

[33] Angus, *Love the Questions*, 147. (Italics added).

[34] Indeed, something very much like this sort of reinforced, albeit 'Marxist', alienation appeared in practice in the former Soviet Union. For example, with the appearance of the so-called "Stakhanov Movement" (in many ways, the Soviet answer to American Taylorism), Soviet Marxism revealed, for all to see, its commitment to the metaphysical cast of mind so common to the epoch of modernity. This led Leon Trotsky to observe that the relation between intellectual and manual labour in the Soviet Union had come to serve no other end than to "trample the idea of a new and higher culture in the familiar filth of capitalism." See Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 82.

> the essential worth of man [sic] does not consist in his being the substance of beings, as the "Subject" among them, so that as the tyrant of Being he may deign to release the beingness of beings into an all too loudly bruited "objectivity." … Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being.[35]

But this critique of the subject/object relation appears more damaging for Hegel than for Marx, since the idea that we humans constitute the substance of beings appears, at least at first glance, more idealist than materialist.[36]

However, Heidegger addresses himself directly to Marx when he concedes that in thinking about history through the concept of alienation Marx "attains an essential dimension of history, [which makes] the Marxist view of history superior to that of other historical accounts."[37] Moreover, Heidegger suggests that approaching history through the theory of alienation puts us in a position to take Marx's 'materialism' seriously. Thus, with Marx we "free [ourselves] from naïve notions about materialism, as well as from the cheap refutations that are supposed to counter it;" but at the same time it becomes clear that, according to Heidegger, "the essence of materialism does not consist in the assertion that everything is simply matter but rather in a metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the material of labour."[38]

In other words, the essence of Modern technology reveals our relation to each other and to the world as one that is fundamentally characterized by what Heidegger calls 'enframing' (in German – 'Ge-stell'). When every being 'appears as the material of labour' then "everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand,

[35] Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, Rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 234 & 245.

[36] Having said that, it is of interest that Axelos appears to read Marx in essentially Hegelian terms when he says that "Marx belongs to the history of metaphysics, which in its recent period regards Man (subject) as its basis. Marx simply socializes subject-Man, believes in universal society, but this remains very prosaic, deprived of world." See Memos, "For Marx and Marxism: An Interview With Kōstas Axelos," 135.

[37] Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 243.

[38] Ibid.

indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for further ordering;" as Heidegger famously put it, everything appears to us as "standing reserve,"[39] even humanity itself.

> The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this. The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand.[40]

Thus, Heidegger ties the modern metaphysical approach to the world, especially in its materialist manifestation, to an instrumentalist metaphysics that subordinates the world to a blind and expansionary imperative to produce for the purpose of consumption.

Indeed Marx does say that "if it is clear that production offers consumption its external object, it is therefore equally clear that consumption ideally posits the object of production as an internal image…. It creates the objects of production in a still subjective form."[41] In other words, under the rubric of 'production', which requires a 'standing reserve' of material for labour, for consumption, Marx's position does appear to remain fettered to the difficulties of Heidegger's critique of modernity. Understanding existence through the consciousness-structuring lens of productive industrial labour, thus, fails "to point beyond capitalism to a possible future society [and, moreover, doing so] affirms some central aspects of capitalism itself."[42] And as we have suggested above, this early statement of Marx's 'ontology' of labour is ancestrally related to Marx's claim at the beginning of Chapter 7 in *Capital* (concerning bees and architects) but, here more so than in *Capital*, his argument appears to rest on precisely the kind of metaphysical

[39] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 17.
[40] Ibid., 18.
[41] Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, 91–92.
[42] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 17.

premises that Heidegger suggests. However, it is not at all clear that Marx continued to maintain a commitment to this sort of metaphysical ontology (Marx, at this point in the *Grundrisse*, appears still to be working through the duality that makes up the relation between an internal, subjective world, and an external objective world).[43] Rather, Marx's approach to labour by the time he writes *Capital* appears to have developed along with his methodological starting point – this is even apparent later in the *Grundrisse,* according to some theorists.

Moreover, with respect to the way in which everything comes to appear as 'standing reserve' in Heidegger's account of modern technology, one might easily imagine Marx reading Heidegger and finding himself largely in agreement. Indeed, the Marxian rejoinder to Heidegger's claim that the essence of materialism is to be found 'in a metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the material of labour' might, as Moishe Postone suggests, consist in pointing out that this is indeed true if and only if one insists on a transhistorical conception of labour which reduces Marx's critique of labour in capitalism to a simple critique of capitalism as it enters into conflict with the realm of socio-biological drives.

> The meaning of the category of labor in [Marx's] mature works is different from what traditionally has been assumed: it is historically specific rather than transhistorical. 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. Moreover, and this is crucial, Marx's analysis does not refer to labor as it is generally and transhistorically conceived – a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating specific products in order

[43] Professor Ian Angus has been kind enough to share with me a paper, never published, though submitted to *Praxis International*. There he argues that where Marx's method is concerned, "it is very important to notice that neither the Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) nor the first volume of *Capital* (1867) utilize the procedure that the *Grundrisse* Introduction suggests. Both the 1859 (*Contribution*) and the 1867 (*Capital*) begin from the notion of the commodity." Angus furthermore argues that this move is significant because it represents "Marx's definitive break with the philosophical tradition." Quoted in Ian Angus, "Ideology as Praxis: The Teleology of Marx's Thought," Unpublished Paper (Amherst, MA., 1992), 20. (Underlining removed, italics added).

> to satisfy determinate human needs – but to a peculiar role that labor plays in *capitalist* society alone.[44]

As such, Heidegger's critique of Marx, at least from a contemporary perspective, appears to address itself only to what is dead in Marx's philosophy. Namely, Heidegger addresses himself to "those ideologies and regimes which are throughout the world called 'Marxism'."[45]

4.2. Kōstas Axelos' Heideggerian Marxism

In a 2006 interview with Christos Memos, Kōstas Axelos said that his 'double reading' of Marx and Heidegger "led him to comprehend that Marx belongs to the history of metaphysics, which in its recent period regards Man (subject) as its basis. Marx simply socializes subject-Man, [and] believes in universal society."[46] But Axelos here asserts, as a simple fact, what is at best only arguably true. Marx's thinking may not be so simple. For even in Marx's early work, in *The German Ideology* for example, Marx and Engels say that "the premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises," which is another way of saying they do not begin with metaphysical abstractions; rather their premises "are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity."[47] This is an ambiguous phrasing that

[44] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 4–5. I cannot, here, rehearse Postone's argument in full. But what is clear is that if Heidegger, and by extension Axelos, read Marx as grounding his critical theory, and moreover his theory of alienation, on a transhistorical conception of labour, then both Axelos and Heidegger may in fact have only poorly grasped the manner by which Marx's position avoids the metaphysical presuppositions they accuse him of. Moreover, Axelos himself may stand guilty of having dehistoricized labour and technology, thereby falling into precisely the metaphysical traps he suggests Marx was unable to avoid.

[45] Henry, "Life and Death," 132.

[46] Memos, "For Marx and Marxism: An Interview With Kōstas Axelos," 135.

[47] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Revised & enlarged. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 149.

certainly *can*, and often has been interpreted in the way that Axelos suggests, that is, metaphysically, as a claim for the centrality of 'man' in an analysis of the difficulties of modern existence.

However, we can, at the same time, interpret Marx and Engels' position as proceeding from an analytical foundation that does not emphasize 'man' as a philosophical abstraction, but rather man's activity as it appears within the historical contingency that is modernity, capitalism. We can read Marx and Engels' premises with an emphasis on human social history as it is disclosed in human 'activity and material conditions, both the conditions which we find already existing and those produced by human activity' within the broader context in which we find these 'conditions'. In other words, we can read Marx metaphysically, as Axelos suggests we should. And if we do so then Axelos' position is well-founded; his position is one in which he reads 'production, work, and growth' in Marx's work as technically constituted, a scenario that, by implication, must seek the overcoming of capitalist alienation in technique. But we needn't follow Axelos' lead here. We might, alternatively, read Marx's work not as a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour, of 'man' as labourer, but rather as a critique of labour in capitalism. Doing so, according to Moishe Postone,

> provides the basis for a critique of the nature of production, work, and "growth" in capitalist society by arguing that they are socially, rather than technically, constituted. Having thus shifted the focus of the critique of capitalism to the sphere of labor, [Postone's interpretation] leads to a critique of the industrial process of production.[48]

[48] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 6.

By contrast, Axelos' Heideggerian reading of Marx commits him, much like Heidegger[49], to the idea that "capitalist technicism poisons and alienates everything, … [but] once technicist alienation is overcome, technique will be able to develop in a manner that is integral and non-alienating if it is kept under the control of the whole of the human community;" Axelos furthermore appears committed, in his reading of Marx, to the idea that "the comprehensive planning of technical production should prevent it from generating alienation and disorder."[50]

But as Ian Angus points out, "a poison need not be an alienation if an alienation demands a reversal. A poison could simply kill. That there is a negativity in the essence of capitalist technicism is exactly what needs to be shown."[51] And Axelos, as much as Heidegger, fails to show that there is a negativity in capitalist technicism so much as he simply establishes this negativity's mere possibility, though not quite its plausibility. Of course Axelos isn't the only thinker to read Marx in this way:

> As is well known, Marx argued that in the course of capitalist development a structural tension, or contradiction, emerges between the social relations that characterize capitalism and the "forces of production." This contradiction has generally been interpreted in terms of an opposition between private property and the market, on the one hand, and the industrial mode of producing, on the other, whereby private property and the market are treated as the hallmarks of capitalism, and industrial production is posited as the basis of a future socialist society. Socialism is understood implicitly in terms of collective ownership of the means of production and economic planning in an industrialized context. That is,

[49] Andrew Feenberg summarizes nicely what Heidegger sees as the 'saving power' that is supposed to be a possibility that arises with modern technological society. Feenberg says that Heidegger "looks forward to a new era … [which] will enable human beings to reclaim their place in a world no longer shrouded in a technological order. The new era will use technology but it will not be technological. It will have a 'free relation' to the realm of production rather than understanding being on the production model." See Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of Technology*, 40.

[50] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 84.

[51] Angus, "Walking on Two Legs," 342.

> the historical negation of capitalism is seen primarily as a society in which the domination and exploitation of one class by another are overcome.[52]

And this is precisely the form of communism (the form of negation of capitalism) that Axelos reads in Marx. For in Axelos' account of Marx's transition from capitalism he argues, as we have already pointed out, that the first premise for overcoming alienation is the development of technique, of industry. This leads to the second premise for overcoming alienation that Axelos reads in Marx, a premise that grows out of the first, like, perhaps, the fruit from a blossom (here we recall Hegel). And this second premise amounts to "the existence of an enormous mass of mankind (namely, the immense majority) that is deprived of all property, that is radically alienated and in irreconcilable contradiction to the world of existing wealth and culture."[53]

According to Postone, "If the forces of production (which, according to Marx, come into contradiction with capitalist relations of production) are identified with the industrial mode of producing, then that mode is implicitly understood as a purely technical process, intrinsically independent of capitalism."[54] And this appears to be the crux of Axelos' reading of Marx. For according to Axelos, Marx "aims for the *overthrow* of traditional Western metaphysics … by bringing it to realization in practice and technique."[55] In contrast, Heidegger believed that modern technology was (though still mired in metaphysics) constitutive of modernity itself – and, by extension, constitutive of capitalist alienation (or rather, constitutive of what Heidegger referred to as the 'oblivion of being'[56]). At the same time Heidegger argued that 'technology' was "up to now the only perceptible phase of the history of Being." Thus he reads in "the doctrine of communism," the idea that "from the point of view of the history of Being it is certain that

[52] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 7.
[53] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 248.
[54] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 9.
[55] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 4.
[56] Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 242.

an elemental experience of what is world-historical speaks out in it,"[57] despite its essential and inextricable relation with the history of metaphysics. Axelos makes this point time and again arguing that "technique, the secret of the modern era under various forms, … operates in Marx's work, and the objective of [Marx's] effort is *simply* a dealienated and total deployment of the power of technique,"[58] or communism in other words.

But as we have hinted, Axelos' position on Marx may actually constitute an elegant and thoroughgoing misreading of Marx's critical theory. To argue in concert with Axelos' reading of Marx tends to separate the concepts of capitalism and modernity – where modernity is understood under the rubric of technique.

> Capitalism is treated as a set of extrinsic factors impinging on the process of production…. This analysis implies that industrial production, once historically constituted, is independent of capitalism and not intrinsically related to it. The Marxian contradiction between the forces and relations of production, when understood as a structural tension between industrial production, on the one hand, and private property and the market, on the other, is grasped as a contradiction between the mode of producing and the mode of distribution. Hence, the transition from capitalism to socialism is seen as a transformation of the mode of distribution (private property, the market), but not of production. On the contrary, the development of large-scale industrial production is treated as the historical mediation linking the capitalist mode of distribution to the possibility of another social organization of distribution.[59]

But in treating Marx's theory of the transition from capitalism to communism, his theory of the return from alienation, as a theory of distribution, we, along with Axelos, thereby read Marx as though he had simply improved Rousseau's critical theory which, for all its critical force remains, in fact, a moralistic critique launched from the "standpoint of capitalism."[60] Moreover, Rousseau's critique of alienation remains mired in the partiality

[57] Ibid., 244.
[58] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 20. (Italics added).
[59] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 9.
[60] Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 64.

of a metaphysics of subjectivity (of the pejorative sort critiqued by Heidegger). Nevertheless, this is the theoretical model by which Axelos approaches Marx when he writes that Marx merely "reverses metaphysics," and thereafter "[generalizes] it after having reversed it."[61] But this reading tends to ignore Marx's critical approach to the standpoint of labour in capitalism, reading in Marx only a "simple, uncritical identification with the standpoint of labour," and which ultimately leaves Axelos' Marx hopelessly embroiled in a metaphysics of "*subjectivity* and *partiality*."[62]

4.3. Axelos' Aporia

When Kōstas Axelos reads Marx, he reads in him the zenith of metaphysical thinking, thinking that is still on its way to overcoming, surmounting metaphysics itself. He thinks that "Marx introduces us to the movement of negativity that runs through universal history, that shakes it to its foundations, and that continues unabated in Marx's own work."[63] But it is difficult to see, in Axelos' reading of Marx, precisely in what this movement of negativity consists and how it might manifest. According to Axelos, "Marx wants man to transcend radically his alienation by launching himself into the conquest of the world."[64] And this conquest, in Axelos' account, is to proceed via the development of technique. But how this conquest amounts to more than an extension, and further entrenchment, of already existent forms of domination remains obscure at best:

> This interpretation of the trajectory of capitalist development clearly expresses an affirmative attitude toward industrial production as a mode of producing which generates the conditions for the abolition of capitalism and constitutes the foundation of socialism. Socialism is seen as a new mode of politically administering and economically regulating the *same* industrial mode of producing to which capitalism gave rise; it is thought to be a social form of distribution that is not only more just, but also more *adequate* to industrial production. This adequacy is thus considered to be

[61] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 327.
[62] Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 64.
[63] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 334.
[64] Ibid.

> a central historical precondition for a just society. Such a social critique is essentially a historical critique of the mode of distribution. As a *theory* of production, [Axelos' reading of Marx] does not entail a *critique* of production. Quite the opposite: the mode of producing provides the standpoint of the critique and the criterion against which the historical adequacy of the mode of distribution is judged.[65]

It should come as no surprise, then, that Axelos reads the continuation of metaphysics in Marx. Any political theory that seeks to politically and economically administer and regulate the *same* industrial mode of producing to which capitalism gives rise, necessarily, avails itself, on a theoretical level, of a metaphysics of subjectivity. For, it is precisely such a metaphysical 'subject', having grown out of capitalist technicism, that would have to *administer* this mode of producing. Insofar as such a state of affairs could be coaxed to fruition, according to Axelos, we would overcome the metaphysical nature of this kind of Marxism via its realization in praxis.

If this new mode of regulation and administration is to be brought to fruition, however, we are left in the metaphysical lurch described at the beginning of this chapter: how to bring into existence a future that appears to have little, if any, basis in experience, past or present. Numerous theories have been proposed in this regard. Axelos, as we have seen, sees the mediating activity that could bring about the negation of capitalist technicism (alienation) in 'the high development of technique'. Presumably, once technique develops to a certain point, once it reaches a kind of critical mass, technical activity would undergo a qualitative change; Axelos sees this change in terms of the movement from socially alienated labour toward play, on a social level – "'activity' that is," according to Axelos, "not directly productive or technically organized."[66] But the claim for this movement remains merely speculative and fails to do more than prolong the difficulty with the theory of alienation described by Ian Angus – what he described as

[65] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 9.

[66] Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Technē in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 194. Axelos' phrasing directly parallels Feenberg's rendering of Heidegger: "The new era will use technology but will not be technological."; See Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of Technology*, 40.

the *terrible delay* that led to "the supplementation of Marxism by phenomenology and the attempt thereby to re-assert the reversal of alienation by phenomenological means."[67]

István Mészáros, among others (Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, for example), has suggested that the mediating action that might bring about the reversal of alienation is to be sought in the realm of politics. According to Mészáros, "the question of a positive transcendence [of alienation] can only be put in *political* terms so long as the society which is thought of as an actual supersession of the one criticized is still to be born."[68] Moreover, Mészáros points to the politicization of education as the key action in bringing about the reversal of alienation. For him "the positive transcendence of alienation is, in the last analysis, an educational task, requiring a radical 'cultural revolution' for its realization."[69] If Mészáros isn't quite prepared to follow Rousseau, who in *The Social Contract* famously asserted that people could be "forced to be free,"[70] he does appear to support the idea that people should be 'taught to be free', though given some of the 20th century experiences in 'cultural revolution' one wonders if the two phrasings are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, Mészáros makes the convincing point that politics, and presumably education as well, can bridge the gap between the present and the future:

> It is a characteristic of politics (and, naturally, of aesthetics, ethics, etc.,) to *anticipate* (and thus to further) future social and economic developments. Politics could be defined as the *mediation* (and, with its institutions, as a means of mediation) between the *present and the future* states of society. Its categories, accordingly, exhibit the character appropriate to this mediating function, and references to the future are therefore an integral part of its categories.[71]

[67] Angus, "Walking on Two Legs," 336.
[68] Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 127.
[69] Ibid., 289–290.
[70] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Toronto: Penguin Classics, 1968), 64.
[71] Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 127–128.

As such any education for freedom will be, of necessity, political. That the current state of education is technological and oriented toward, as Heidegger and Axelos suggest, production is so obvious that it hardly bears mentioning. Thus, in general (though not exclusively) contemporary political education fails to "point beyond capitalism to a possible future society, [and] it affirms some central aspects of capitalism itself."[72] This, in part, can be explained on the basis, as Heidegger suggests, of the structuring presence of techno-science in education, and all spheres of contemporary activity.

For others such as Moishe Postone and Bertell Ollman, 'education' takes the form of criticism, of critical readings of traditional approaches to political (and by extension educational) theory – in this case, critical readings of 'traditional' Marxist theory grounded in techno-scientific worldviews. As Ollman argues, "if Marx sought, as he tells us, 'to find the new world through the criticism of the old', then any judgement of his views on communism rests in the last analysis on the validity of his critique of capitalism."[73] But by extension, any judgement of this sort must also rest on the validity of our interpretation of Marx's critique of capitalism, on the validity of our retelling of the story of Marxist alienation. Thus, my critique of Axelos here is to suggest that his retelling of the Marxian story of alienation exhausts the possibilities of that story and culminates with the present as the 'end of history' insofar as we accept the Heideggerian reading of 'labour' in Marx.

For as Postone indicates in his analysis, "Marx's theory does not assert that labor is the transhistorical structuring principle of social life; it does not grasp the constitution of social life in terms of a subject-object dialectic that is mediated by (concrete) labor."[74] If this is so, then Axelos' reading of the potentiality of labour as expressed in technique, and of the Marxian project more generally, reads only metaphysics in Marx because his reading of labour is merely metaphysical. Instead, Postone suggests that we should see

[72] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 17.
[73] Ollman, *Alienation*, 238–239.
[74] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 388.

labour in capitalism as the source of domination, and not necessarily as the grounds for emancipation:

> In [Marx's] mature theory, the critique of exploitation and the market is embedded within the framework of a far more fundamental critique, in which the constituting centrality of labor in capitalism is analyzed as the ultimate ground for the abstract structures of domination, the increasing fragmentation of individual labor and individual existence, and the blind runaway developmental logic of capitalist society and large-scale organizations that increasingly subsume people. This critique analyzes the working class as an integral element of capitalism rather than as the embodiment of its negation.[75]

But insofar as we accept Postone's reading of Marx's critical theory, of his critique of the alienating socio-political quality of labour in capitalism, we remain without a theory of the return from alienation.

Postone suggests that his reading of Marx implies that "the Marxian critique points to the possible overcoming of the structures of abstract compulsion characteristic of capitalism, the possible abolition of proletarian labor, and the possibility of a different organization of production, while suggesting that they are related intrinsically."[76] It is true that Postone's position only points to the open possibility of overcoming a certain kind of alienation, but it does so in a way that does not seek, as Axelos does, following Heidegger, to find salvation in danger, or convalescence in the poison that initially induces the illness. Perhaps more importantly, Postone does with Marx what Axelos had aspired to – he appears to find in Marx many more open questions and possibilities, than metaphysically closed totalities.

[75] Ibid., 388–389.
[76] Ibid., 389.

5. Conclusion

My discussion of the Marxian story of alienation begins with Franz Borkenau's theory of the emergence of Western individualism in the historico-linguistic record. On the basis of Borkenau's research, among others, I argue that the emergence of Western individualism is an important cultural event that is a constitutive part of the modern Marxian story of alienation. The first element in this story is 'going out from self'; where 'self' is understood at the level of society in history, 'going out from self' identifies the rise of individualism with an ontological privileging of the human individual via her rise to a dominant socio-political position over the collective self. I furthermore discuss Walter Benjamin's use of the concepts of aura and mimesis to identify some of the ways that Western individualism might spread throughout time and space. I then discuss Benjamin's reference to a second nature, constructed via technique, that ultimately constitutes a form of subjective agency which overwhelms the individuals who bring it into existence.

With respect to the historical record, Borkenau identifies some of the first linguistic evidence for the emergence of Western individualism in a European cultural artifact, a golden horn of Danish origin dating from approximately 400 C.E. In accordance with our usual understanding of the structure of historical narrative, this event should precede the second part of the alienation story – the expansion of possibilities in externality. However, my re-telling of the story of alienation is complicated by my turn to Alfred Sohn-Rethel and his discussion of the emergence of the abstract intellect (what I equate with the 'expansion of possibilities in externality' portion of the alienation story) on the basis of the central role he attributes to the 'exchange relation' in society. Nevertheless, Alfred Sohn-Rethel provides us with a compelling account of the way in which this aspect of the process of alienation contributes to the expansion of certain types of intellectual capacities (e.g. abstract conceptual thought), capacities that, on his account, reinforce class antagonisms and socio-political and economic alienation – ideology in other words.

I then critically engage the difficulty of narrative sequence that arises in my story. I do so by showing how the manner in which we usually understand the concept of narrative is bound to the very form of consciousness that arises out of the exchange relation that Sohn-Rethel critiques. Before discussing the manner by which Sohn-Rethel conceptualizes the passage from the alienated state of social being that supports the flowering of modern intellect, I briefly follow Sohn-Rethel as he shows how abstract intellect harnesses its own power and becomes a force that structures our reality. My discussion of Sohn-Rethel's claims concerning the overcoming of alienation, the third part of the alienation story, then lead me to examine Kōstas Axelos' Heideggerian reading of Marx, a reading that gives rise to Axelos' claim that it is in technology that the overcoming of alienation is to be sought. Ultimately, I argue that Axelos' solution to the problem of alienation is inadequate, and that the inadequacy of his turn to 'technique' is a consequence of the way in which he reads Marx, the way in which he, himself, re-tells the story of alienation.

Initially, this project was driven by my interest in the points of convergence between Heideggerian philosophy (phenomenology) and Marxism. Ian Angus suggests that phenomenological Marxism is most successful when it reimagines Marxism "and generalizes it into a critique of systems of representation."[1] Put another way, phenomenological Marxism is most successful when it understands itself as critical theory, as a critique of ideology (understood in its broadest sense). And it was with this in mind that I have undertaken to examine the work of French Heideggerian Marxist, Kōstas Axelos, and his critique of Marx's philosophy. At the same time, if phenomenological Marxism is at its best when it aims at critiques of representation, of ideology, then Marx's theory of alienation is one of the natural starting points for a Marxian critical theory since, as we've already noted, Marx's theory of ideology is a part of his broader theory of alienation.[2] However, Axelos himself tends to focus on the conditions for overcoming capitalism, often to the detriment of an explanation for the

[1] Angus, "Walking on Two Legs," 343.
[2] Eagleton, *Ideology*, 70.

emergence of alienated conditions of social being. This leaves Axelos' reading of Marx's theory of alienation wanting in terms of an explanatory basis in material history. To be sure, Axelos' exegetical work with Marx's texts is impressive, but he doesn't appear to articulate a theory of the relation between material existence and ideal being so much as he simply criticizes the continued existence of a material/ideal binary in Marx's work. This leads him to read Marx in such a way that Marx's thinking appears to remain entangled in the difficulties that Marx himself aims to surmount. In other words, Axelos' approach leaves Marxism as *he* finds it, as metaphysical and ideological philosophy.

Slavoj Žižek has written extensively on ideology and in his discussion of "How Marx Invented the Symptom," he argues that Alfred Sohn-Rethel is "the theoretician who has gone the furthest in unfolding the *universal* reach of the commodity-form."[3] Žižek's comments led me to consider the manner by which Sohn-Rethel argues that the division between intellectual and manual labour, a division engendered by the commodity form, gives rise to ideologically structured consciousness. This, furthermore, led me to re-examine Marx's theory of alienation itself, about which much has been written. And while theorists such as Bertell Ollman and István Mészáros (among others) have produced excellent work on Marx's theory of alienation as it relates to modern political theory and to the broader field of Marx's thought, they don't appear to apply Marx's theory to a reading of the history of the occident in the way that Axelos (who, following Heidegger, engages the history of metaphysics), Sohn-Rethel (who engages the history of the emergence of abstract thought), or Borkenau (who examines the emergence of individualistic culture – the emergence of the individual abstracted from society) all do. In other words, theorists such as Ollman and Mészáros tend to confine their analyses to the modern period, thereby leaving out some of the compelling historical theory to be found in the work of the thinkers I engage with here.

Indeed, Franz Borkenau's theory of language change offers a compelling starting point for thinking about Marx's theory of alienation in its three parts. In short, reading

[3] Žižek, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," 301.

Borkenau, Sohn-Rethel, and Axelos enables us to think about Marx's theory of alienation in ways that seem to me to be historically concrete, contemporarily relevant, and intellectually illuminating.

Moreover, as I have already suggested, Axelos, Sohn-Rethel, and Borkenau have undertaken important work that appears to have gone underappreciated, if not entirely unnoticed, in recent years. Borkenau's work, especially in the sociology of language, appears to me to point the way toward exciting socio-historical research in the relation between social activity and consciousness. Sohn-Rethel provides us with a sophisticated Marxian critique of epistemology, and Axelos articulates some important Heideggerian critiques of the metaphysical character of what Moishe Postone would call 'traditional Marxism'.

Ultimately, I am critical of Axelos; and any such critique must by implication touch Sohn-Rethel's work also, since both Axelos and Sohn-Rethel appear to envision the social overcoming of alienation in similar terms. I critique Axelos by turning to the work of University of Chicago historian Moishe Postone. Moishe Postone's work, though not originally part of my research design, came to play a significant role in my work because the nature of any work on Marx's concept of alienation, almost by definition, follows in the tradition of Western Marxism. Thus, Postone, who cites his major influences as Georg Lukács and the first generation of the Frankfurt school, has naturally produced significant work dealing with many of the concerns raised by the theorists I undertake to analyse here.[4] While Postone does not address Borkenau's theory of language change, he does address, as we have seen, some of Borkenau's early methodological difficulties. Moreover, he directly addresses some of the problems with Alfred Sohn-Rethel's work in *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, which was the text I focused on in my discussion. And while Postone does not explicitly enter into dialogue with

[4] See Moishe Postone and Timothy Brennan, "Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 308–309. Here Postone candidly discusses his formative intellectual influences.

Kōstas Axelos' work, I believe Postone's critique of what he calls 'traditional Marxism' has significant implications for Axelos' reading of Marx.

In any case, my reading of alienation, I believe, raises more questions than it settles. I can only outline those issues here, suggesting in certain cases possible criticisms or solutions, while in other cases suggesting where my future research might go in order to begin to properly explore these questions.

First, Franz Borkenau's early work (for example, *The Transition from the Feudal to the Bourgeois World-View*) comes in for criticism from Henryk Grossman, from Alfred Sohn-Rethel (by implication), and from Moishe Postone. By all accounts, there were empirical difficulties with Borkenau's work. Even so, there are more significant difficulties with Borkenau's early work, according to his critics, than a simple confusion of empirical facts would suggest. Georg Lukács once argued that even if all of Karl Marx's empirical claims were to be disproven, "every serious 'orthodox' Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto* – without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment."[5] In other words, Lukács here testifies to the methodological power of Marx's approach. In contrast, as we noted in our Introduction, it is precisely Borkenau's methodology that comes under fire from Sohn-Rethel and Postone (via a critique of Grossman's) for its fidelity to what Sohn-Rethel called a theory of reflection, the most crude metaphysical version of the Marxist 'base-superstructure' metaphor.

However, I have suggested that it remains unclear whether Borkenau continued to hold to such a simplistic model. Based on my preliminary research into Borkenau's theory of language change, I suspect that there is more to his approach than Grossman, Postone, or (by implication) Sohn-Rethel suggest. Obviously, this is one area for further analysis and research. Moreover, I have suggested in my discussion of Sohn-Rethel that the concept of solipsism has played a significant role in the history of Western Thinking.

[5] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 1.

Borkenau's discussion of the emergence of individualism may prove significant in this regard also.

Recently, as I have already suggested, Alfred Sohn-Rethel's work has undergone a resurgence in popularity in Marxist circles. His work has been appropriated by Slavoj Žižek for its critical explanation of the origins of bourgeois epistemology – that is, ideology. Obviously further study should be undertaken concerning Sohn-Rethel's work in this area. And insofar as we are willing to take Hannah Arendt's suggestion seriously – the suggestion that the 'fallacy of solipsism is one of the most persistent and pernicious fallacies in the history of philosophy' – Sohn-Rethel's work will prove important in any study of this aspect of the history of philosophy. But as Moishe Postone points out, while Sohn-Rethel's discussion of the relation between the commodity form and consciousness is powerful, it is not without its difficulties:

> Sohn-Rethel … does not distinguish between a situation such as that in fifth-century Attica, where commodity production was widespread but by no means the dominant form of production, and capitalism, a situation in which the commodity form is totalizing. He is, therefore, unable to ground socially the distinction, emphasized by Georg Lukács, between Greek philosophy and modern rationalism. The former, according to Lukács, "was no stranger to certain aspects of reification [but did not experience them] as universal forms of existence; it had one foot in the world of reification while the other remained in a 'natural' society." The latter was characterized by "its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the principle which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind"[6]

Relatedly, Sohn-Rethel's critique of capitalism remains flawed, according to Postone, precisely because Sohn-Rethel does not differentiate between societies in which there are commodities, and societies in which the commodity form, centered around abstract labour, is totalizing. It is in this way that Postone differentiates his own work from Sohn-Rethel's:

[6] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 156, n. 90.

> [Sohn-Rethel] does not analyze the specificity of labor in capitalism as being socially constituting but, rather, posits two forms of social synthesis – one effected by means of exchange, and one by means of labor. He argues that the sort of abstraction and form of social synthesis entailed in the value form is not a labor abstraction but an exchange abstraction. According to Sohn-Rethel, there is a labor abstraction in capitalism but it occurs in the process of production rather than in the exchange process. Sohn-Rethel, however, does not relate the notion of labor abstraction to the creation of alienated social structures. Instead, he evaluates positively the mode of social synthesis purportedly effected by labor in industrial production as noncapitalist and opposes it to the mode of societalization effected by exchange, which he assesses negatively. The latter mode of social synthesis alone, according to Sohn-Rethel, constitutes the essence of capitalism. This version of a traditional interpretation of the contradiction of capitalism leads Sohn-Rethel to claim that a society is potentially classless when it acquires the form of its synthesis directly through the process of production and not through exchange-mediated appropriation. It also weakens his sophisticated attempt at an epistemological reading of Marx's categories.[7]

Nevertheless, Sohn-Rethel's approach remains interesting precisely because it offers a sophisticated epistemological reading of Marx's categories, but also because it illuminates, via the problems that Postone points to, the centrality of labour in Marx's critique.

Similarly, Postone's reading of the role of 'labour' in Marx's work places him in opposition to readings of Marx such as Axelos'. For Postone, unlike Axelos, "it is industrial labor that is seen as the barrier to human emancipation rather than as the key to its overcoming."[8] As I argue above, Axelos reads labour in Marx the way Heidegger does, which is to say, he reads labour like a philosopher, transhistorically, metaphysically. This of course should come as no surprise since, according to Mark Poster, "Axelos explicitly proclaimed his contemplative stance, wishing only to present Marx's thought as a 'philosophy.'"[9] This illuminates the need for further investigation, as

[7] Ibid., 177–178.
[8] Postone and Brennan, "Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview," 305.
[9] Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France*, 61–62.

Hannah Arendt suggested, into the relationship between thinking and action. And Axelos, no less than Arendt, is exemplary of both the success and the failure of this project to date – in short, Axelos' work illuminates the difficulty inherent in this kind of a project. For this reason, Axelos, among other politically minded philosophers, should be re-examined for what they can tell us about the relation between critical philosophy and the politics of production, of political economy.

Finally, while I have made extensive use of Moishe Postone's analysis and conceptual tools, I have not engaged in a critical reading of Postone's work. One of the issues surrounding his work that needs to be addressed is the extent to which Postone himself remains bound up in a kind of 'metaphysics'.[10] This, in addition to attempts to carry Postone's work forward, is another direction that future research in this area might take.

What is certain, however, is that in light of recent economic and political events, and after a number of years spent languishing in the annals of intellectual fashion, Marx's analysis of life under capitalism has made its return. In view of recent global economic events, this is not surprising. In 2005 political economist David Harvey remarked that "deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common."[11] And a decade and a half earlier, writing in a climate of 'post-Marxist' thought, philosopher Jacques Derrida strikingly observed that it has become impossible to "ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth."[12] Recent global events have only highlighted what has never gone away, namely, the structures of socio-political domination that appear to be the inevitable

[10] Postone and Brennan, "Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview," 310. Brennan suggests this critique to Postone in an interview. However, Postone never addresses the question directly, arguing instead along Lukascian lines that his approach is methodological and seeks to change the terms of the debate.

[11] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

[12] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1994), 85.

accompaniment of capitalism as a mode of production. Thus, it behooves us, as it did Marx also, to attempt to understand "what Marx was trying to get at as a young man with the notion of alienation, that is, with the notion that people create structures that dominate them."[13] This attempt, then, is what underlies my reading and re-telling of these stories, stories that are a practical grasping toward what may yet come to be told as a part of a different story, perhaps a story of liberation told by those who continue to struggle toward that end.

[13] Postone and Brennan, "Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview," 316.

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