

**Žižek as a Reader
of Marx, Marx as a
Reader of Žižek**

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One very productive way of understanding Žižek's Marxism is to read it as an extended attempt to flesh out the meaning and implications of the famous line from the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where Marx writes: "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past."¹ In this we see, in an extremely condensed form, the two main components of Marx's thought on history and social change: on the one hand individual subjects are who and what they are as a result of the material circumstances and social structures — culture, traditions, government, economies, class, and so on — in which they find themselves; here there is very little actual agency for individuals. On the other hand, however, Marx claims, it is out of this determinism that individuals and groups become able to "make history" or bring about change in the social world and thus have the potential to break the hold of the weight of such history and circumstance. Many commentators when discussing Žižek's Marxism tend to focus primarily on his emphasis on the theory of ideology or his Leninism.² I want to begin with something lesser noted but equally important (and ultimately foundational for both the conception of ideology and Žižek's overall philosophical view), namely the importance Žižek places on Marx's analysis of the commodity form and its nature as an abstraction.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek argues that Marx's conception of the commodity form has been so influential because it

offers a kind of matrix enabling us to generate all other forms of the “fetishistic inversion”: it is as if the dialectics of the commodity form presents us with a pure—distilled so to speak—version of a mechanism offering us a key to the theoretical understanding of phenomena which, at first sight, have nothing whatsoever to do with the field of political economy (law, religion, and so on). In the commodity form there is definitely something more at stake than the commodity form itself and it was precisely this “more” which exerted such a fascinating power of attraction.³

He goes on to argue, in reference to the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel on this particular topic, that the commodity form as analyzed by Marx reveals the: “skeleton of the Kantian transcendental subject. . . . Herein lies the paradox of the commodity form: it—this inner-worldly “pathological” (in the Kantian meaning of the word) phenomenon—offers us the key to solving the fundamental question of the theory of knowledge: objective knowledge with universal validity—how is this possible?”⁴

What the commodity form, as analyzed by Marx, gives us is a glimpse into the material foundation of subjectivity (and of the society in which subjectivity finds itself) as well as the objective (in a Kantian sense) forms of knowing through which subjects grasp their world. There is no need to rehearse Marx's detailed analysis of the commodity form here (as it is well-worn territory), but in order to understand the point being made, we should recall briefly that on Marx's reading of it, a thing is a commodity insofar as it comes to have not merely use-value but also exchange-value, which ultimately becomes its defining feature over against use-value.⁵

Since it is the case that exchange-value is not connected to (and dominates) use-value, the commodity form itself is, as Marx argues, “characterized by a total abstraction from use-value,” reflecting only quantity (or a monetarily quantifiable value)—a quantity that can be measured against other commodities and their value-as-quantity—and not quality.⁶ Further explaining this point Marx writes: “Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: our use-value may be a thing of interest to men. It is no part of us as objects. What however does belong to us as objects is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other, we are nothing but exchange-values.”⁷ Both

exchange-value and the commodity that results from it are born of a social relation, or an act, namely, the exchange of commodities. This act is itself born in a particular social context (capitalism). In this act, the abstraction that is the commodity is, as Marx describes in the passage above, treated *as if* it is the bearer of value in-itself (and not simply of use to individuals) and it ultimately becomes this “as-if.” It is here that Sohn-Rethel’s analysis of Marx becomes important, according to Žižek. Sohn-Rethel shows us that this “as-if” does not arise in the consciousness of those who engage in the exchange of commodities, but it is the structure inherent to this that determines the very being of that consciousness. Here is Sohn-Rethel:

The essence of commodity abstraction, however, is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in men’s minds, but in their actions. And yet this does not give “abstraction” a merely metaphorical meaning. It is an abstraction in its precise literal sense. The economic concept of value resulting from it is characterized by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur in the market. . . . It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. Rather it is purely social in character, arising in the sphere of spatio-temporal human relations. It is [again] not people who originate these abstractions, but their actions.⁸

There are two important features of the Marxian analysis that Sohn-Rethel seeks to clarify here (and that Žižek both agrees with and wishes to extend). First, the abstraction inherent in the commodity form is, as noted, founded on human action. The point here is similar to the point that Louis Althusser makes in his view that it is action, or social practice, that is primary and consciousness is built on this.⁹ Second, as also noted, it is the result of a particular form of social existence (namely the capitalist form). It is this abstraction that does the determining of the form of thought for individuals who exist under capitalism and capitalist modes of production with their attendant social relations.

Though we can see broad agreement between Sohn-Rethel and Althusser, insofar as both see social practice as being prior to and determinative of the consciousness of individuals, Sohn-Rethel criticizes portions of Louis Althusser’s reading of Marx’s analysis of commodity

abstraction in that Althusser, rather than taking Marx's analysis literally, sees it as metaphorical.¹⁰ Žižek also agrees broadly with the Althusserian thesis regarding the primacy of practice.¹¹ In *The Sublime Object*, however, Žižek opts for Sohn-Rethel's analysis over against that of Althusser insofar as it radicalizes the Althusserian "distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge" and allows us to view abstraction as a "third element which subverts the very field of this distinction; the form of thought previous and external to thought—in short: the symbolic order."¹² I will return to a discussion of Žižek's linking of Sohn-Rethel's critique of the commodity form to the Lacanian concept of the symbolic order later. For now, the important point is that abstraction, as Marx understands it, is not to be thought of as metaphorical, something that has no reality or, finally, a distortion of an underlying nonabstract existence; the abstraction that is the commodity form, its attendant act, and the forms of consciousness that are derived from it are very real and, as just pointed out, ultimately foundational.

I should pause for a moment here to point out that the conception of abstraction under consideration is that of Marx's mature, post-1857 renovation of the Feuerbachian notion of abstraction—what Alberto Toscano (with reference to Roberto Finelli) calls the "real-abstract" or "real-abstraction"—which is, as Toscano puts it,

a break with a generic, humanist, or anthropological concept of abstraction: the passage to a notion of *real abstraction*—abstraction not merely as a mask, fantasy, or diversion, but as a force operative in the world . . . the crucial theoretical revolution would then be one that passes through this fundamentally intellectualist notion of abstraction—which presumes liberation as a "recovery" of the presupposed genus (putting Man where God, qua distorted humanity, had once stood)—to a vision of abstraction that, rather than depicting it as a structure of illusion, recognizes it as a social, historical, and "transindividual" phenomenon.¹³

There is no illusion. The "abstraction" of the commodity form and the web of human relations that determine it are what is "real" full-stop. The real-abstraction that is the commodity form is, as Toscano argues, the "transindividual" phenomenon that acts to determine both capitalist society and the ways in which individual capitalist subjects come into being (from capitalist subjectivity to proletarian subjectivity, and

every other possible subject of capital). Or, as Toscano puts it (giving it a proper Hegelian inflection): “this real-abstract movement of totalization is capital qua substance becoming ‘Subject.’”¹⁴

Furthermore, in referring to real-abstraction as “transindividual,” Toscano points us to Balibar, who argues in *The Philosophy of Marx* that though Marx did not have the terminology to name the “transindividual phenomena” as such, it is a concept that captures Marx’s meaning when he writes in the *Theses on Feuerbach* of the human essence as nothing more than the “ensemble of social relations” that exists at a given time (of which the abstraction that is the commodity-form, and the act of exchange on which it is based, is a part under capitalism).¹⁵ Balibar continues: “The words Marx uses reject *both* the individualist point of view (the primacy of the individual, and especially the fiction of an individuality which could be defined *in itself*, in isolation, whether in terms of biology, psychology, economic behavior or whatever), *and* the organicist point of view (which today, following the *Anglo-American* usage, is also called the holistic point of view: the primacy of the *whole*, and particularly of society considered as an indivisible unity of which individuals are functional members).”¹⁶ Here we begin to see a link back to the first part of Marx’s claim from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Individual subjects and the form of thought that attends these subjects are—pace the real-abstraction founded in the act of commodity exchange—what they are as a *result* of the social relations in which they are enmeshed. The social form of commodity exchange (and the social practice that supports it) is *prior to* subjective constitution, and it is that through which individuals become the subjects that they are.

Returning now to Žižek’s introduction of the Lacanian concept of the symbolic into this reading of Marxian abstraction so as to supplement Balibar’s and Toscano’s linking of the real-abstract to transindividuality, as Balibar himself notes, Lacan is one of those who offers us a theoretic that allows for a conception of transindividuality that condenses and clarifies what is at stake in Marx’s analysis of abstraction and of the commodity form.¹⁷ Elaborating on this, Žižek shows us how the symbolic order functions in the same manner as Marxian “real-abstraction”: “insofar as Lacan defines the symbolic order as neither objective nor subjective, but precisely as the order of *intersubjectivity*, is not the perfect candidate for this third logic of intersubjectivity the psychoanalytic ‘log

of the signifier' that deploys the strange structure of the subject's relationship to the Other qua his symbolic substance, the space in which he interacts with other subjects?"¹⁸ In fact, this should not only help us further make sense of both the argument that real-abstraction and the commodity form are themselves foundational to the production of subjectivity under capitalism but also give us some insight into how such a foundation is itself not an illusion, while at the same time it remains an abstraction. What intervenes between the objective, taken as the "brute" empirical fact, and the subjective—thought—is precisely the symbolic order. Take Žižek's example of this in relation to how we, as sociolinguistic subjects, come to hear "meaning" in what are otherwise nothing more than brute linguistic utterances: "When I hear a word, not only do I immediately abstract from its sound and 'see through it' to its meaning (recall the weird experience of becoming aware of the non-transparent vocal stuff of a word—it appears as intrusive and obscene . . .), but I have to do it if I am to experience meaning."¹⁹

As with the practice of commodity exchange, language is a transindividual, intersubjective, real-abstract *thing* that is formed out of the relations between various historically grounded linguistic meanings and practices that exist in a given sociohistorical space, the totality of which can be likened to a social substance or Spirit (*Geist*) in Hegelian parlance. Such a substance is, as Žižek argues, the third moment in the triad and acts to interpellate (to use an Althusserian term) individuals as its subjects insofar as individuals enter into the preexisting meanings—and the practices that support them—of a given sociohistorical community, so much so that, as in the example given above, even our very physical apparatuses (hearing in this instance) are trained by this substance in its constituting us as subjects. Returning now to the real-abstraction of the commodity form, here again is Žižek echoing much of what I have said already while at the same time reiterating the Marxian analysis of the violent nature of capital: "this 'abstraction' . . . is the 'real' in the precise sense of determining the structure of material social processes themselves: The fate of whole swaths of the population and sometimes whole countries can be decided by the 'solipsistic speculative dance of capital, which pursues its goal of profitability with blessed indifference to how its movements will affect social reality. Therein lies the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism . . . [it is] no longer attributable to concrete

individuals and their “evil” intentions, but is purely “objective, systemic, anonymous.” Žižek continues: “here we encounter the Lacanian difference between the reality and the Real: ‘Reality’ is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and the productive process, while the Real is the inexorable ‘abstract’ spectral logic of Capital that determines what goes on in social reality.”²⁰ So, putting all of this together, we might say that the “Reality” of systemic violence is imposed on individual subjects of capital by the “Real,” which is itself the result of the social practices (such as the act of commodity exchange). These practices in turn, make up the real-abstract, intersubjective, transindividual, symbolic substrate within which such subjects are founded.

What now of the second moment in the quotation from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*? How do we go from a seemingly all-encompassing lack of subjective freedom to a conception of the possibility of that subjective freedom and further, the possibility of revolutionary change? We can see this most fully if we now—with Lacan in view—turn for a moment to Žižek’s materialist reading of Hegel.

In the opening pages of *The Parallax View* Žižek renders his materialist position in this way:

materialism is not the direct assertion of my inclusion in objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); rather, it resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I am included in the picture constituted by me—it is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both outside and inside my picture that bears witness to my “material existence.” Materialism means that the reality I see is never “whole”—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.²¹

The “redoubling of myself” that Žižek refers to here can be understood in relation to what I have said above. It is the redoubling that occurs in my awareness of myself (and my world) as built for me out of the material of the historico-communally grounded (transindividual) symbolic order that exists for me (that is, my *inclusion* as a being that is itself constructed by that symbolic universe and its relations) *and at the same time* my awareness of (in a properly materialist awareness anyway) the fact that my awareness of this is itself partial and limited. Adrian Johnston

puts this point in this way: “what appears as external reflection (i.e. the gaze of the subject on substance) is not confined to an epistemological field separated off from the reflected-upon reality of being. Rather than being external, this reflection is inscribed in the reality of being upon which it reflects as an internal inflection, an immanent folding-back of substance on itself; the gaze of the subject upon substance is substance-as-not-all gazing upon itself.”²²

In this way, Žižek’s materialism is not a rejection of the ideal altogether, or a relegating of it to another realm, but an embracing of the existence—and determining power—of the ideal qua subjectivity in a quasi-Kantian sense, but with a Lacanian-Hegelian twist in which the ideal itself is located as emerging *in*, and out of, the real-abstraction of the material symbolic. As such, subjectivity is itself (even in its ideality), materially generated, universally always-already partial, limited, and not-All there is.

If this is correct, if the finite, pathological, and limited ideal—even though it is that through which reality is constituted for us—emerges, as I have shown, out of the material, if the subject is, in Hegelian fashion (as Toscano has asserted), simultaneously substance, the question is then *how* does such a split, such a redoubling emerge? Or, as Žižek himself asks the question in *The Parallax View*, “how, from within the flat order of positive being, [does] the very gap between thought and being, the negativity of being, emerge?”²³

One way Žižek works to make sense of this is by looking to Hegel’s conception of “habit”—which here functions as a nice stand-in for the conception of social practice explored above—as our naturally extant “second nature”: “it is not that the human animal breaks with nature through a creative explosion of Spirit, which then gets habituated, alienated, turned into mindless habit: the reduplication of nature in ‘second nature’ is primordial, that is, it is only this reduplication that opens up the space for spiritual creativity.”²⁴

The argument here goes as follows (echoing, again, much of what I have said already): the distinction between first nature and second nature is, for the human, *not really a distinction*—we are beings whose first nature is to be beings who have a second nature. This second nature—signified here as a collection of historically contingent and changing “habits” that are built out of what is communally acceptable and founded—is what

organizes and constructs subjectivity's appearance. In this way, subjectivity is the internalization of that which is originally external and communal.

These subjective habits are truly habits insofar as they are experienced by *the individual subject* not as contingent chosen activities but rather as the necessary features of existence. One such set of habits is, as I have shown, linguistic habits, in which we become habituated to hear meaning. (Another is, obviously, the habits generated by the act of commodity exchange.) In this way, through habituation to and in historico-cultural practices (linguistic and otherwise), the actions themselves are "freed" from their material foundations, and this is reduplicated at a second level, which becomes the most important level. (Note once more the structural similarity here with how Marx describes the liberation of the commodity from its value-as-use in the creation of exchange-value.) Again referencing Hegel, Žižek argues: "Hegel emphasizes again and again that . . . habit provides the background and foundation for every exercise of freedom . . . through habits, a human being transforms his body into a mobile and fluid means, the soul's instrument, which serves as such without us having to focus consciously on it. In short, through habits, *the subject appropriates the body*."²⁵

The freedom Žižek speaks of here is the emergent freedom of thought out of being, the transcendent out of the material, the "inner" out of the "outer" in which the outer (the body) comes to be regulated and controlled by this inner (the subject), which itself is first found externally to the individual (in the material real-abstract of the transindividual symbolic): "The conclusion to be drawn is thus that the only way to account for the emergence of the distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' constitutive of a living organism is to posit a kind of self-reflexive reversal by means of which—to put it in Hegelese—the One of an organism as a whole retroactively 'posits' as its result, as that which dominates and regulates, the set of its own causes (i.e., the very multiple processes out of which it emerged)."²⁶

I am enmeshed in the real-abstract social practices and structures that exist at a given time. These become the inner structure of my subjectivity as they are internalized by me and become part of who and what I am. At the same time this inner structure is then imposed on the world—by me—and is what acts as the "virtual" or "immaterial" limit of the world

itself. In other words, I experience this limit—set by me in my subjective conceptual presuppositions—as an externally imposed limit. In this way my own positing activity is what imposes the limits and the concepts through which I understand my world: “In this way—and only in this way—an organism is no longer limited by external conditions, but is fundamentally self-limited—again, as Hegel would have articulated it, life emerges when the external limitation (of an entity by its environs) turns into self-limitation.”²⁷

Returning to Kant, Žižek continues: “there is a link to Kant here, to the old enigma of what, exactly Kant had in mind with his notion of ‘transcendental apperception,’ of self-consciousness accompanying every act of my consciousness (when I am conscious of something, I am thereby always also conscious of the fact that I am conscious of this)? Is it not an obvious fact that this is empirically not true, that I am not always reflexively aware of my awareness itself?”²⁸

I am, in a very precise way, *not* aware of the presuppositions that I extend to my world in my everyday quotidian dealings with it, but it is these presuppositions that act as the very frame and filter of my cognition. This frame, however—and this is the important point—though it is ideal, in the sense of being the immaterial imposition of the subject-as-constructed out of the material, has a concrete effect on the reality that I experience. It is here that we can best see the link between the Žižekian reading of the Marxian notion of real-abstraction via the commodity form that I have been discussing and the theory of ideology: my world is an ideological construction insofar as it is retroactively posited (by me, in the already described subjective reduplication, without my awareness) as a closed whole, but as just mentioned, this positing activity is not merely imaginary: it has real consequences for the world as it exists. In further delineating this point Žižek invokes Deleuze:

the solution to this dilemma is precisely the notion of virtuality in a strict Deleuzian sense, as the actuality of the possible, as a paradoxical entity, the very possibility of which already produces/has actual effects. One should oppose Deleuze’s notion of the virtual to the all-pervasive topic of virtual reality: what matters to Deleuze is not virtual reality, but the *reality of the virtual* (which in Lacanian terms, is the Real). *Virtual reality* in itself is a rather miserable idea: that of imitating reality, of reproduc-

ing its experience in an artificial medium. *The reality of the virtual*, on the other hand, stands for the reality of the virtual as such, for its real effects and consequences.²⁹

“Virtual” here is, of course, the term signifying the “inner” immaterial product—the subjective posits/presuppositions—of the “outer” material structures—historically bound social practices—that in turn, comes to have a decisive effect on the material world.

If the story I have told accounts for the material generation and constraint of individual conscious awareness, as it offers an explanation of the ways in which subjectivity is constructed by, supports, and reproduces the existing set of social practices (especially those under capitalism such as commodity exchange) and habits—via a retroactively posited virtualized totalization—it also, as I have begun to show, offers us a brief sketch of the ways in which the possibility of revolutionary change appears on the scene, according to Žižek. That there are “subjects” at all is a change (as the subject is the immaterial shift that arises out of the material). Further, Žižek’s account of subjectivity’s nature as self-limiting makes its own action the foundation for change, to the extent that individual subjects can become aware of their own power as the self-limiting entities that they have become as a result of the material processes in which they find themselves (and out of which they were first constructed).

This is a point not to be missed. In the contemporary moment of the reemergence of a radical politics and a theoretical “return to Marx,” Žižek’s Marxism offers us a way to see that the materially emergent subjective act of self-limitation can be put into the service not only of the existing transindividual constellation of social practices but also of a vital oppositional force. This is to say, that we can come to realize that the real-abstract out of which we were first formed is not all there is, that subjectivity itself is, in its very nature, already a break with that which determines its form, insofar as it is the very example of a more-than-material thing.

This, again, offers the demonstration that the existing real-abstract (which is conditioned in large part by the commodity form and the act of exchange) is not all there is and the hope (and possibility) of some kind of social existence that is radically other than the current one. We should,

thus, reassert that famous claim that Marx and Engels make in the *Manifesto* but with a slightly different tone. It really is true that capitalism and capitalist social relations create “the weapons that bring death to itself”; not only in the classical sense of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat but also insofar as the capitalist real-abstract creates a more than material subjectivity itself.³⁰

Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 329.
- 2 See, for instance, Matthew Sharpe, “Žižek,” in *From Agamben to Žižek*, ed. Jon Simons (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), and Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).
- 3 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 9.
- 4 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 10.
- 5 See Karl Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1904).
- 6 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 460.
- 7 Marx, *Capital*, 480.
- 8 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (London: MacMillan, 1978), 20.
- 9 For Althusser’s own description of the foundational nature of social practice, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
- 10 Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 20.
- 11 For a detailed account of this relation see Geoff Pfeifer, *The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming), especially chapter 2.
- 12 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 19.
- 13 Alberto Toscano, “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction,” in *Re-thinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Society, and Culture* 20, 2 (2008), 273–87.
- 14 Toscano, “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction.”
- 15 Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 172.
- 16 Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1995), 31.
- 17 Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*. He points this out directly after the passage just cited.
- 18 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 81.
- 19 Slavoj Žižek, “Discipline between Two Freedoms: Madness and Habit in German Idealism,” in Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 106.

- 20 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 244.
- 21 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 17.
- 22 Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 166.
- 23 Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 6.
- 24 Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," 100.
- 25 Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," 101.
- 26 Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," 106.
- 27 Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," 106.
- 28 Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," 109.
- 29 Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," 109. Emphasis in the original.
- 30 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 250.