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## **Gerda Walther on the Reality of Communities**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on a crucial question of social ontology addressed by Gerda Walther, namely, whether a social community has its own reality over and above that of its members and its cultural “products”, such as language, religion, infrastructure, and works of art. Walther has a nuanced answer which combines elements of phenomenology and Marxism. She praises Marxists for drawing our attention to the “community as such”, taken as an object distinct from its members and their relations. She maintains the thesis, defended according to her by “certain socialists and Hegelians” (which presumably includes Marxists), that communities have their own reality. However, she develops it one step further, arguing that these social structures are “higher-order” unitary realities that exist over and above their members and cultural products. In addition, she enriches this realist position from a phenomenological point of view by identifying with precision the kinds of mental act on which communities are founded, namely, “unifications” and “we-experiences”. As such, Walther’s theory is an early encounter between phenomenology and Marxism, prior to Trần Đức Thảo and Jean-Paul Sartre, and thus deserves much more attention than it has received in the history of philosophy.

**Keywords:** Gerda Walther; Karl Marx; Phenomenology of Groups; Realism about Social Structures

### **Introduction**

There has been a long interest among philosophers and social scientists in the relations between phenomenology and Marxism, which were two dominant trends in twentieth-century philosophy and in the humanities more generally. Phenomenology is often thought to be

focused on subjectivity, and concerned more precisely with describing our mental life and the world as it appears to us. Marxism, on the other hand, is supposed to be interested in social structures, analyzing first and foremost the interactions among groups of human beings with different economic conditions, that is, the social classes.

This contrast is usually not described as a contingent difference in the order of inquiry, as if one tradition happened to start with subjectivity, the other with social structures, while both in fact acknowledge the existence of both subjects and society and put them on a par. It has been seen rather as a difference in their *theoretical stance*: phenomenology is usually thought to give explanatory priority to subjectivity over social structures, as if the latter could ultimately be reduced to the former, while Marxism is thought to adopt the opposite explanatory direction, treating the subject as some sort of epiphenomenal entity that is fully determined by social structures.<sup>1</sup> The general question that lies behind the supposed opposition between these two traditions is thus: Between subjects and social structures, which are real? That is, do both subjects and social structures exist, or can one be reduced to the other? And if both exist, which one is fundamental? That is, which has metaphysical priority over the other, and how exactly does one ground the other?

There have been several attempts to combine phenomenology and Marxism and show that they were both legitimate theoretical approaches describing different aspects of reality. Famously, Jean-Paul Sartre provided such an attempt with his *Critique de la raison dialectique*, published in 1960, and prior to him, Trần Đức Thảo wrote his *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* in 1951.<sup>2</sup> However, an (unduly) underestimated figure in this respect is Gerda Walther, who was at the heart of both traditions: she was a phenomenologist who directly studied under Husserl, but was also strongly inspired by Marxism, for she was close to influential Marxists such as Karl Kautsky. She combined insights from both traditions in

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean these descriptions to be correct. On the contrary, as stressed by Zahavi and Salice (2017: 515), this picture of phenomenology might come from “critical theory” itself, which led people to think that “due to its preoccupation with subjectivity, phenomenology was taken to be fundamentally incapable of addressing the issue of intersubjectivity in a satisfactory manner”. But as Zahavi and Salice show in their paper, which is precisely about Walther, as well as Edith Stein and Aron Gurwitsch, this is incorrect. More generally, while phenomenologists are indeed interested in the analysis of our mental life and their objectual correlates, they also address other philosophical issues which are independent of any description of subjectivity, e.g. the analysis of (mind-independent) essences; this is especially the case with the “early phenomenologists”, to whom Walther belongs.

<sup>2</sup> Other French philosophers who combined phenomenology and Marxism to various degrees include De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty; on the relation of phenomenology and Marxism in France, see Féron 2021. In Italy, one should also mention Enzo Paci. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting these references.

her philosophical treatise on “social communities”, published in 1923, in which she directly addressed the relation between subjectivity and social structures.

Walther holds that social communities are real entities. More precisely, she claims that communities are “higher-order unities” (*Einheiten höherer Art*), which exist over and above their members and the relations among them (1923a: 144). She explicitly praises Marxists for drawing our attention to the “community as such”, as an object distinct from the “sum” of its members and the “sum of their relations” (1923a: 97–99). Moreover, she claims that “certain socialists and Hegelians” – which presumably includes Marxists – hold that communities exist in reality as *sui generis* entities (1923a: 123), just as she does. At the same time, and despite her praise of Marxists, she regrets that they go too far in privileging the community as such over its members, for this leads them to neglect in their analysis the importance of individual subjects (1923a: 98 n. 1). As a phenomenologist, Walther also wants to acknowledge that social structures are grounded in specific mental acts of their members.<sup>3</sup> Based on a fine-grained phenomenological analysis, she identifies these acts as “unifications” and “we-experiences” (1923a: 34 and 70–80). In addition, she holds that communities are grounded in the bodies of their members, a point which, as she adds, shows that Marxist “historical materialism” was partially correct (1923a: 125). Finally, she claims that a community cannot be reduced to its “products” (*Gebilde*), by which she means its cultural outputs broadly understood (art, law, etc.), a notion that she borrows from Husserl. She holds that this non-reductionism is also defended by Marx and some (Austro-)Marxists philosophers (1923a: 28–29 and 139).

Not only was Walther’s work influenced by Marxism (and socialism), her theory can in fact be seen as an improvement on the realist view about social structures found in Marxism. There are two reasons to think so: first, as I will argue, her account of communities in terms of “higher-order” entities is metaphysically more accurate than the way Marxists understand social structures; second, she takes great care to analyze the connection between communities and the mental acts of their members, identifying the precise kinds of act that found these social structures. While there is an increasing number of studies on Walther (see especially the texts in Calcagno 2018), and while Marxist influences in her work have been pointed out (see notably McAlister 1995 and Mühl 2018a), there is, to my knowledge, no

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<sup>3</sup> I use “mental act” in a broad sense here, to include not only cognitive phenomena but also conative ones, not only occurrent thoughts but also states, and not only active experiences but also passive ones.

detailed study of the role played by Marxism (and socialism) in her metaphysics of communities and the way she combines this to phenomenology.

The aim of this paper is to present Walther's account of the reality of social communities and to show how it combines Marxism with phenomenology. In the first, shorter section, I will introduce some general biographical and theoretical information about Walther. In the second section, I will present her views about "unifications" and "we-experiences" and the way they ground communities. In the third section, I will focus on her realism about communities. In the fourth section, I will compare her realism about communities with the Marxist account of social structures, and argue for the superiority of Walther's view.

### **1. Biographical and Theoretical Sketch**

Despite being usually classified among (early) phenomenologists, Walther initially entered into philosophy via another intellectual tradition, namely, Marxism. As she explains in her autobiography (1960), she had a training in Marxism in her early years provided to her by prominent figures of the tradition such as Karl Kautsky and Gustav Eckstein. August Bebel was a friend of her father, Otto Walther, as was Kautsky, in whose house in Berlin she lived for some time before her university years (for details, see Walther 1960: 84–99 and 133–144).

Walther studied philosophy in Munich (starting in 1916), and attended lectures by the phenomenologist Alexander Pfänder, but also by Max Weber. She also studied in Freiburg, where she attended lectures by Husserl and got to know his students and assistants. However, she wrote her dissertation with Pfänder (on all this, see McAlister 1995: 189–191 and 197, and her references to Walther 1960 more generally). This dissertation is her treatise *Zur Ontologie der sozialen Gemeinschaften* (On the ontology of social communities, 1923a), in which Walther brings together her various intellectual influences. Its scope is impressive: it discusses in detail figures such as Husserl and Pfänder, and combines this with discussions not only of Marx and (Austro-)Marxists, but also of important sociologists such as Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber. The contrast between the intrinsic value of this treatise and the lack of attention it has received from philosophers is certainly a sign of Walther's marginalization as a woman (which only compounded the fact that she was a member of an already neglected philosophical tradition, namely, "early phenomenology"; for more on the political issue of the marginalization of women in philosophy, see Witt and Shapiro 2015).

Unfortunately, Walther was not able to pursue an academic career, a task which was far from easy for a woman at that time, made still more difficult for her by the economic crisis of 1920, as a result of which she lost her (significant) inheritance and was forced to go to

work (see again McAlister 1995: 191, and the references to Walther 1960). As the title of her autobiography – *Zum anderen Ufer: Vom Marxismus und Atheismus zum Christentum* (To the other shore: from Marxism and atheism to Christianity) – indicates, she was increasingly interested in religion, and even became a believer. It is noteworthy that she also combined her phenomenological stance with her interest in spirituality, and wrote a treatise on the phenomenology of mysticism (*Phänomenologie der Mystik*, 1923b), published in parallel with her treatise on social communities. She also published several pieces on parapsychology, trying again to show how the phenomenological method could help in this discipline (see, e.g., her 1955). This later interest of hers might have contributed to her marginalization in philosophy (as argued in McAlister 1995: 196).

As noted above, Walther's initial background was Marxist, but she also became a member of the so-called "early phenomenology" tradition. What is distinctive of this tradition is its realism about the external world, in contrast to Husserl's transcendental idealism, which holds that the world is "constituted" by subjectivity (Husserl 1977; on the realism of early phenomenologists and on this tradition more generally, see Salice 2015). Another important stance of the early phenomenologists is their focus on essences. They thought that an important task for philosophers is to get insight into essences, which, inspired by Plato, they took to exist independently of the mind (see, e.g., Reinach 1989b). Interestingly, they accepted essences for entities of all kinds – not only logical and geometrical entities, and natural kinds, but also social-cultural items such as law or the State (Reinach 1989a and Stein 2006). They also accepted that mental acts have essences, claiming that they have essential properties and connections which are independent of being instantiated in this or that existing species (Reinach 1989b).

Like her colleagues, Walther was a realist who was interested in inquiries on essences. At the beginning of her work on social communities, she carefully presents the scope of her study. As she emphasizes, she is interested in the *ontology* of social communities. By "ontology", she does not mean the study of "what there is" (Quine), but rather the study of essences (1923a: 3–4). There are several "regions" of essences – for example, that of the essences of mental acts, of law, of the State, etc. – and the (sub)regions she is interested in specifically is that of social communities.

Since Walther wants to ground social communities in specific mental acts (as noted above), her inquiries into the ontology of social structures are enriched by what she calls "phenomenology", namely the study of the "essence" of consciousness as such:

(...) phenomenology does not want to deal with any factualities of consciousness and of empirical-contingent individual experiences, but to study its essence, its essential differences and structural connections (1923a: 4).

There are indeed essential properties at the level of our various mental acts, and phenomenology attempts to sort them out and look for their connections, interdependencies, etc. This inquiry is made from the first-person point of view, as initiated by Brentano (1982) under the label of “descriptive psychology” and developed by his pupils, including Husserl and then his own students. Now, phenomenology plays a crucial role in Walther’s study on communities, for, as I have noted, she wants to show with great precision in what kind of mental act communities are grounded.

## **2. At the Basis of Social Communities: Unifications and We-Experiences**

Walther’s 1923 *Zur Ontologie der sozialen Gemeinschaften* exhibits clear influences of Marxism (as also pointed out by McAlister 1995: 196). Walther explicitly praises Marxists for focusing on the “community as such” and for distinguishing it from its members and their relations.<sup>4</sup> Following “certain socialists” (which presumably includes Marxists), she claims that communities are real *sui generis* entities. As a phenomenologist, however, she also aims to show how a community is founded on the mental life of its members. She identifies two sorts of mental acts which are crucial in this respect: *unifications* and *we-experiences*.<sup>5</sup> This section is devoted to the presentation of these two sorts of act.

Walther holds that the first feature to be pointed out in the essence of social communities is that they are “connections of objects” forming a “unity”. More precisely, in order to form a “community”, these objects must be “living beings”. Additionally, in order to form a *social* community, they must be “human beings”, which she defines as “psychic-spiritual” entities (1923a: 18–19). While psychic beings are presumably those which are conscious, spiritual beings are those which are able to have intellectual and ethical “insights” (*Einsichten*) (1923a: 13 and 58). However, this is still not enough to get a clear sense of what

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<sup>4</sup> Marxism is also present in other aspects of Walther’s work. In her philosophical anthropology, for example, she defends the Marx-inspired thesis that human beings are essentially social; on this, see Mühl 2018a. (This of course recalls Aristotle’s thesis that a human being is “by nature a political animal”; see *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a1–4.) More generally, it would be interesting to study Walther’s political views in more detail and also ask how her account of communities contributes to them or is influenced by them. Unfortunately, this cannot be done in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of these two kinds of act in Walther’s theory of communities is especially pointed out in Mühl 2018a.

social communities are.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there are many sorts of gatherings of human beings, but Walther wants to identify the features proper to communities. She distinguishes between “masses” (*Massen*), “societies” (*Gesellschaften*), and “communities” (*Gemeinschaften*) (famously, the distinction between societies and communities comes from Tönnies 2016, while the analysis of masses in phenomenology is initially found in Scheler 1973; on Walther’s relation to Tönnies, see also Zahavi and Salice 2017: 519, and on masses in Scheler see Thonhauser 2020; I discuss similar issues as regards Stein in Taieb 2020).<sup>7</sup> In a nutshell, masses are transient groups whose members are “swept along” by one another but are not conscious of the group as such (on masses, see 1923a: 98). Societies are more solid and structured entities: they are groups of people organized around a common goal. However, it seems that there are many kinds of group which are solid and structured, while not being connected merely by a common goal, but in some “deeper” way. Examples of such groups are families and states. These are precisely the kind of entity that Walther wants to pick out in her account of community.

For a community to exist, there must be several human beings with a common concern for one or several objects, that is, with a common goal, a mutual consciousness of this concern, and a “mutual influence” on each other (*Wechselwirkung*). The object can be very different from one community to another: it can be God, mathematical propositions, cricket, or even the group itself, as in the case of a family (1923a: 29, 49–50 and 67). However, these conditions are also fulfilled in a society, in which people collaborate in view of a common goal. But then, Walther asks whether one should hold that a community is recognizable in that it follows detailed rules, long-lasting traditions, etc. – what Weber (2018), as she points out, calls “institutions” (*Anstalten*). Her answer is that we would still be reluctant to call such a group a community if the people submitted to these detailed rules do not understand each other, if they are competitors who see each other in an unfriendly manner, or even if they are indifferent to each other (1923a: 32–33; on this issue, see also Léon and Zahavi 2016: 227, as well as Zahavi and Salice 2017: 519 and Salice and Uemura 2018: 37). In a community, Walther says, following Tönnies (2016), there seems to be a closer relationship between its members, some sense of togetherness.

So, what is specific to a community? It is what Walther calls “inner unification” (*innere Einigung*). Borrowing this notion from Pfänder (1913), she describes it as referring to

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<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I will call “social communities” simply “communities”.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for their help on the origins of these distinctions.

a specific sort of “feeling”, namely, a “feeling of togetherness” (*Gefühl der Zusammengehörigkeit*) (1923a: 33; and Léon and Zahavi 2016: 227, Zahavi and Salice 2017: 519, Salice and Uemura 2018: 37, as well as Mühl 2018a: 80). It seems to be a *sui generis* feeling, which thus is not reducible to any other feeling, such as the pleasure of collaborating with somebody. Walther probably would point to our experience and say: Just think about the kind of feeling of being together that you have with your fellow activists when preparing a demonstration; this is what I have in mind when I talk of unification.<sup>8</sup> Walther provides a further description of this feeling: it is a sensation of a loosening of the “boundaries” of the self and a welcoming of some other entity into oneself (as pointed out by Salice and Uemura 2018: 37, quoting 1923a: 34–35). All members of the community must have this feeling: that is to say, the unification is a “mutual unification” (*Wechseleinigung*) (1923a: 63).

This unification allows for something particular, namely, “we-experiences”. These experiences are had together with what Walther calls “people who also...” (*Menschen, die auch...*), that is, people who think, feel, and value things in the same way as oneself. The idea is not that all members of a community perform the same, numerically identical act; rather, they all have their token acts not just of believing or valuing this or that, but of thinking-together-with-the-others or valuing-together-with-the-others. This seems to be confirmed by Walther’s insistence that in a we-experience, the others are “in me”, such that I have my own token act of we-experience in which I welcome others (see 1923a: 69–70, 70–71 and 75).<sup>9</sup> Note that unification seems to be the precondition for we-experiences (as pointed out also in Léon and Zahavi 2016: 228):

All social structures that exhibit such a unity of the members and *only* those are, according to us, communities, and it is only for them that one can according to us, strictly speaking, talk of *common* experiences, actions, goals, desires, volitions, wishes, etc. (in contrast to *identical* or *similar* experiences, actions, etc., which might possibly occur in the case of the connections of a society) (...). (1923a: 33)

Since members of a community have common “experiences” (*Erlebnisse*), they have a “common life” (*gemeinsames Leben*) (1923a: 66). Once unifications and we-experiences are

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<sup>8</sup> On the fact that Walther points to our experience, see Salice and Uemura 2018: 37. On that kind of ostensive definition in phenomenology more broadly, see Textor 2019.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see Léon and Zahavi 2016: 228, as well as Zahavi and Salice 2017: 520, Salice and Uemura 2018: 38–39, Mühl 2018a: 81–83 and 2018b: 22–23, Caminada 2014, and Schmid and Wu 2018.



given, there also arises a “community as such” (*Gemeinschaft als solche*), which is a “supra-individual” entity with a “supra-personal, psychic (and spiritual) unity” and its own “communal life” (1923a: 95, 97–99 and 114). (The next section will be devoted to the question of whether this supra-individual entity is indeed real.)

In order to understand how communities are founded on their members, some additional “egological” issues must be mentioned, which also play an important role in Walther’s evaluation of “objectivism” vs. “subjectivism” about social structures (and reveal theoretical concerns relating to her Marxism). In our mental life, Walther distinguishes the “I-centre” (*Ichzentrum*) from the “self” (*Selbst*) (1923a: 15–16, 56–59, 88–89 and 114).<sup>10</sup> The I-centre is our foreground consciousness; it is made up of our attentional consciousness and the will. The self is our background subjective life, which supplies the I-centre with experiences (with or without the control, acceptance, or rejection of the I-centre). Now, the I-centre is where our individual mental life expresses itself, that is, it exhibits only I-experiences; by contrast, unifications and we-experiences are elements present at the level of the self, that is, in the background (1923a: 58–59). More specifically, Walther acknowledges a “communal self” (*Gemeinschaftsselbst*), which is in the background of consciousness and is the source of we-experiences (1923a: 70–71 and 88). It seems that the communal self is constituted by a unification, and its persistence through time is due to “habitual unification”: just as our knowledge of mathematics is still present in us when we do not do mathematics, our various unifications are present even when we do not experience them (1923a: 38–44; on the importance of habitual unification for the existence of the communal self, see Salice and Uemura 2018: 37–38; on habitual unification, see also Caminada 2014).

In her most precise phrasing, while Walther says that communities are founded on “experiences”, and thus presumably we-experiences, she does not speak of them as founded on unifications, but rather on “the sphere (...) in the self of their members (...) in which they are unified with other members”, that is, the “social self” (1923a: 125). However, the social self arguably is nothing other than unifications, and so the idea still seems to be that the community is founded on them (see also Salice and Uemura 2018: 38). And since unifications are a precondition of we-experiences, the “main assignment point” (*Haupteinsatzpunkt*) (that is, the primary foundation) of the community is the “social self” (1923a: 131).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The distinction is based on Pfänder 1913, and also on his “(unpublished) lecture *Psychologie des Menschen*” (see 1923a: 55–56 and 130 n. 1), part of which is perhaps found in Pfänder 1933.

<sup>11</sup> Presumably, what Walther calls the “social self” is broader than the “communal self”, for it should include the other sort of unification that Walther apparently accepts, though she does not develop the

Crucially, Walther thinks that distinguishing between an I-centre, with I-experiences only, and a self, including a communal self with unifications and we-experiences, avoids some standard pitfalls in discussions on social structures. She claims that the failure to make the distinction explains all at once the errors of both strong objectivists and strong subjectivists. Indeed, people usually reduce our psychic lives to the I-centre, which is individual, and thus claim that subjects have no common experiences. Given this, there are two options about the existence of communities, both problematic according to Walther. First, one might want to grant the existence of entities such as communities, because there are some institutions in human societies which seem to manifest a strong form of togetherness, for example, families or nations. But then one becomes *too* objectivist: one treats communities as “separate living beings”, since the psychic lives of their members are only individual, and thus cannot ground this togetherness. Or, second, one might be reluctant to admit such strange “separate living beings”, with a life fully independent of that of their members. In that case one ends up in strong subjectivism, admitting only isolated I-centres, with no communities over and above them (1923a: 88).

Walther means to have a middle solution. On her view, there are we-experiences, which come from “behind” the I-centre, from the self – or more precisely, from the communal self, which is constituted by a feeling of unification (with others). This acknowledges the existence of some togetherness in the subjects themselves, and thus, in turn, of something which can ground communities, making it possible to avoid the conclusion that they are free-floating entities fully independent of their members. Note that Walther also rejects the anti-subjectivist view – which she attributes to “some Marxists and Hegelians”, mentioning Renner (1904: 151) as a Marxist, but no Hegelian – according to which “communal selves” are individualized in the members of a society and constitute their I-centres. The idea here seems to be that a member of a given society has an I-centre that is numerically distinct from those of other members but overlaps with them qualitatively, in the sense that a person’s I-centre is made up of several (individualized) communal selves, for example, her familial self, plus her social class self, plus her national self (1923a: 88–89, and Renner 1904: 151; Walther adds that she reconstructs the view using her own phenomenological concepts).

There is no doubt that the kind of fine-grained analysis that Walther provides of the mental foundation of communities has no equivalent in the Marxist tradition. For her analysis

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point at length, namely, the unification found in masses, where there are also “people who also” (1923a: 97).

relies on the years of investigation into mental acts from the first-person point of view conducted by Husserl and his students, and before them by Brentano (1982) and his (other) pupils. This kind of precision in the study of mental acts is the mark of phenomenology.<sup>12</sup> Marxism should presumably be better for framing the reality of social structures. However, as I would like to show in the next two sections, this is not so clear either.

### 3. The Reality of Communities

To this point, I have spoken of the mental acts on which a community is founded. However, Walther seemingly rejects the idea that a community is to be reduced to these acts or their bearers. As noted above, she claims that a community is a “supra-individual” entity, and that it has a “supra-personal, psychic (and spiritual) unity” with its own “communal life” (1923a: 95, 97–99 and 114).<sup>13</sup> According to Walther, Marx and Marxists are to be praised for putting the focus on the “community as such”, over and above its members. More precisely, what she says is that they drew our attention to the “proper domain” of sociology, which is the social structure as such, taken as an object distinct from the “sum” of its members and the “sum of their relations”. They thus made possible the “true sociological attitude” (1923a: 97–99). As she says:

It is only where this attitude is adopted – both by external observers and by the members of the community itself – that a true sociology seems possible for us, a sociology of the community. [Footnote:] It is above all the merit of Marx and of Marxism (and of some positivist followers of Comte) to have brought this thought again and again to the foreground, even if, on the other hand, from a psychological, ethical, and metaphysical standpoint, the individual often came short, when it was not totally negated (...). (1923a: 98, incl. n. 1; my addition)<sup>14</sup>

As this passage makes also clear, despite Walther’s praise for the focus of the Marxists on the community as such, she complains that they do not make enough room in their theory for

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<sup>12</sup> In Taieb 2020, I argue similarly that Stein’s fine-grained analyses of mental acts, which she also owes to her training in phenomenology, allow her to develop a detailed account of the way a state can be said to act.

<sup>13</sup> Note that Walther holds that even if a community has a “supra-personal, psychic (and spiritual) unity”, it has no personality, since it lacks two important features of a person, namely, a “conscious I-centre” (*Bewusstseinsichzentrum*) and a “willing I-centre” (*Willensichzentrum*) (1923a: 114).

<sup>14</sup> I will not discuss the reference to Comte and positivism, for this would go beyond the scope of this paper.

individual subjects. But she immediately adds that the Marxists' neglect of subjectivity should be forgiven, for, as she says (with a nice Marxist flavour):

It certainly lies in the essence of historical dialectic that an insight should first appear in an extreme way in order to be able to win through. (1923a: 98 n. 1)

Moreover, in the foreword to the dissertation version of her treatise (1922: iii–iv), Walther explains that her interest in communities came from Marxism, but that she was dissatisfied with “social determinism” and the negation of individual subjectivity, and progressively moved towards phenomenology, where she found helpful theoretical tools. Importantly, these remarks show that Walther herself is willing to furnish a harmonious melding of Marxism and phenomenology in her account of communities (not that I am unduly attributing this to her). In a nutshell, Marxists draws attention to the community as such – and Walther follows them by acknowledging that it is distinct from its members and their relations – but when they do so, they neglect the importance of individual subjects – and Walther wants to correct this through detailed phenomenological analysis of the founding of communities on the mental acts of their members.

One might think that since Walther describes communities as supra-personal unities, she clearly is a realist. Strikingly, however, she qualifies this point at the very beginning of her discussion of the issue of realism (1923a: 123–131). She holds that until the section where this discussion takes place, the inquiry has been able to isolate an intentional object, that is, the community, which according to its descriptive content is different from its members; for example, it is a unity whereas its members are a plurality. This allows one to speak of it as some supra-individual entity, *provided it is taken as an intentional object*. But what about the reality of this entity? As Walther puts it:

We have already proven that a community can be *meant* (vermeint) by intentional acts of the most various types as a self-standing object sharply distinct from its members and their sum and interaction (...) – but what about the reality of this intentional entity? (1923a: 123)

Walther explicitly holds that this question goes beyond the “ontology and phenomenology” of communities (1923a: 123). Indeed, ontology is about essences; thus, in the present case, it is about the essence of communities, whereas phenomenology is about the essence of consciousness, and thus in this case is about the essence of the underlying mental acts that

found a community. But as Walther seems to suggest, we are now interested in *metaphysics*; that is, we want to know whether communities *really exist*. She claims that saying that they do would amount to following “certain socialists and Hegelians”:

According to one view, there is “nothing other than” the sum of singular individuals, which due to theoretical reasons of expediency can be subsumed under the concept of different communities, though there is no reality that is in itself (*keine an sich seiende Realität*) which corresponds to these concepts. By contrast, one finds, especially in certain socialists and Hegelians, the contrary opinion being defended. What position do we want to take on this? Is a community, as a *reality* (that is, not just as a concept or an idea), only the sum of its members, or does it subsist outside of them, independently of them, in a sort of “objective” spirit, etc., an autonomous “community soul”, etc.? Is it more than or less than the sum of its members? (1923a: 123)

The “‘objective’ spirit” (“*objektiver*” *Geist*) given as an example of realism is presumably a reference to Hegel. As for the “autonomous ‘community soul’” (*selbstständige ‘Gemeinschaftsseele’*), it is not clear to me whether this refers to socialists, or if it does, to whom exactly. Independently of this, however, it is reasonable to think that some of the socialists Walther has in mind here are Marxists, or more precisely, Austro-Marxists, since these are the socialists she regularly quotes in her treatise, namely, Max Adler and Rudolf Hilferding (1923a: 28 n. 2 and 89 n. 1), as well as Karl Renner (1923a: 88 n. 1).<sup>15</sup> In particular, when she complains that Marxists put too great a focus on the community as such at the cost of individual subjects, the author she criticizes for this is Renner (1923a: 98 n. 1 and 88 n. 1), so it may be him that she has in mind when she speaks of “socialists” who are realists about communities. (Note also the parallel phrases: “certain Marxists and Hegelians” in 1923a: 88 and “certain socialists and Hegelians” in 1923a: 123)<sup>16</sup> But which side is Walther herself on? I think that she does maintain that communities really exist over and above their members, though the realist interpretation is not so obvious.

There are some statements which seem to confirm Walther’s realism about communities, for example this one:

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<sup>15</sup> She also refers to August Bebel and Karl Kautsky, but only in the foreword to her doctoral dissertation (1922: iii).

<sup>16</sup> I will not discuss Hegel further in this paper, despite his important role in the development of Marxism; I suspect that Walther’s relation to Hegel is mediated by Marx; that is, it must be that she understands certain crucial Hegelian notions (such as “objective spirit”) through a Marxist filter. However, showing this would require a separate discussion.

Thus, social communities reveal themselves to us as self-standing, real soul-spiritual higher-order unities. (1923a: 144)

Walther can also be found to say that the reality of a community is not reducible to its members and their relations (1923a: 146–147; this is pointed out in Salice and Uemura 2018: 39 n. 11).

It is worth pointing out that the non-reducibility of a community to its members includes non-reducibility to its members' bodies, and that a community is likewise not reducible to its "outputs" or cultural products. Let us first address the non-reducibility to bodies. In the section on the reality of communities, Walther holds that communities are founded not just on minds but also on bodies, "at least in *this* earthly world" (*in dieser irdischen Welt wenigstens*).<sup>17</sup> This is the occasion for her to make another acknowledgement to Marxism. She holds that members of communities often interact (as members of their communities) with objects in the material world, which requires using their bodies, and also that communication between members of a community requires bodily actions. This, she adds, shows the partial truth of "historical materialism" (1923a: 125). Historical materialism is the theory defended by Marx and Engels (see 2017, among others) that the history of humanity is driven by the economic organization between human beings, who are gathered into groups with distinct economic statuses – (social) classes, in Marxist terminology. It ultimately explains all human phenomena, including socio-cultural phenomena, as deriving from economic processes, which are themselves intimately linked to the needs of embodied beings. Now, Walther thinks that founding communities only on bodies is incorrect, because specific psychic experiences are required to found them, and these experiences are not reducible to bodily events. However, communities are indeed connected with bodies, since human beings interact with the material world and communicate with each other. However, Walther's claim that communities are not reducible to their members or their relations surely

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<sup>17</sup> Note by the way that this shows that when Walther claims that a social community can hold only between human beings, in 1923a: 18, we should understand "human being" in a broad sense, that is, as a "psychic-spiritual being", since she apparently accepts non-earthly communities made up of non-embodied living beings. Compare nonetheless to 1923a: 18, where she adds, without further precision, that "angels, fairies, dwarfs, mermaids, centaurs, etc." could not have a social community. But the claim perhaps is made only in the trivial sense that since these entities do not exist, they cannot build a social community (see the reference to "imaginary entities" [*Phantasiegestalten*] just a few lines above on the same page).

also extends to bodies: indeed, communities are explicitly described as “higher-order” entities compared to the bodies of their members (1923a: 144).<sup>18</sup>

Let us now turn to cultural products. Another claim that Walther makes, in the section about the reality of communities, is that a community is not reducible to its “outputs”, by which she means its cultural products, broadly understood. This is a reference to Husserl, whose views Walther knew from his (at that time) unpublished lectures on “Nature and Spirit” (see now Husserl 2001, and especially Husserl 2002, which dates from Walther’s time as a student). According to Husserl, every society generates “cultural products” (*Kulturgebilde*) (Husserl 2002: 140). These are entities linked to the needs and actions of the society. They always have a material basis, at least a linguistic one, but they also exhibit a psychic aspect, for they either embody meanings, or reveal a certain goal for the sake of which they have been made. Cultural products include all sorts of things, notably “spiritual products” such as “languages, sciences, legislations”, “religious products”, “technical products” from tools to civil engineering, and “artistic products” (see Husserl 2002, among others; I am partly following Walther’s reconstruction, 1923a: 28–29, and esp. 127–130 for the list of products).

Now, Walther holds that a community cannot be reduced to its cultural products; rather, the products *presuppose* the community. She holds that this is a view also defended by Marx and Marxists, referring to the famous theory of “commodity fetishism”, which is developed in the first chapter of *Capital* (1923a: 28–29 and 127–130; see Marx 1991; two Marxists she specifically mentions are Adler [1904] and Hilferding [1974]). In a nutshell, Marx’s view is this: a commodity is initially created following the concrete needs of a community. However, it is then separated from this community. A commodity is originally a means, made by a community to meet its needs, but it then becomes an end. It initially had a use value, based on its role as a means, and which its exchange value should follow, but its status as an end makes it possible to separate its exchange value from its use value. The exchange value can then rise independently of the use value, and the economical circulation of the commodity helps the accumulation of capital. In a healthy economy, the commodity would remain connected to the community and its needs, instead of being treated as an autonomous entity. What Walther presumably likes in this theory is the idea that some cultural products seem to have a “particular, autonomous life” (as Adler says [1904: 374]),

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<sup>18</sup> Although it would be an interesting inquiry, I leave aside discussion of how the foundation of a community on bodies interacts with the foundation on the psychic-spiritual life of the members of the community.

even though they in fact originate in the concrete needs of a community, and thus presuppose it.

At this stage, one might say: Well then a community is not just its members (including their bodies) and their relations, nor is it just the cultural products of the community; thus, it does indeed seem to be some additional entity. However, if one reads Walther closely, it is not so clear that such a conclusion would be correct. When discussing the reality of communities, she claims that a community is both “less” and “more” than its members: less because its members have other experiences besides unifications and we-experiences; more because the community includes not just its members, but also its cultural products:

However, it holds (...) for *all* communities, no matter their kind, that they are from one point of view more, but from another point of view less than the sum of their members and their experiences. Then from one side those real and unreal objects on which it is founded or rather co-founded also undoubtedly belong to the being of the community. (1923a: 124)

One might then think that Walther in the final analysis *is* a reductionist: she rejects the claim that a community is reducible to its members and their relations, but only because it is reducible to them *plus* the cultural products of the community.<sup>19</sup>

Is Walther’s view correctly captured by this “arithmetical reductionist” reading? I would deny this and would instead privilege the realist reading, for two reasons. First, when Walther speaks of the connection of the community with its members (and their bodies) and its cultural products, she often speaks of a “founding” of the former on the latter. This seems to imply that there is a relation between two distinct *relata*, or, say, two relational “poles”, one being the community, the other made up of all the entities founding it (see 1923a: 124, quoted above, and also 1923a: 125 and 126; the fact that a community is “founded” on its members is stressed in Salice and Uemura 2018; more on this below). Second, realism seems to be confirmed by her claim that communities are “real soul-spiritual higher-order unities” (1923a: 144, also quoted above). If communities are higher-order entities, then they exist *over and above* some other entities of a lower order; if they were reducible to these lower-order entities, then they would obviously not be of a *higher* order. So, apparently, communities are entities in their own right that are founded on their members and cultural products, and are not

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<sup>19</sup> There are still other elements on which a community is or can be founded in Walther, including the “real-metaphysical fundamental essence” of their members (1923a: 124–125). In order not to introduce too many notions in this paper, I will not discuss these further complications.



reducible to them. Note that while Walther holds that cultural products presuppose a community, this does not preclude a relation of foundation: the community is arguably founded on the products *a posteriori*: that is, though they *originate* in the community, their existence as its achievements contributes to defining the community. (Compare: the accomplishments of a person, although they originate in her, contribute to defining her as the very person she is.)

When reading Walther's treatise, one might regret that she does not say more about how to understand this "foundation" and the "higher-order" nature of the community. But in fact, what she claims is that she will address the issue of realism "*even if this problem goes beyond the competence of an ontological-phenomenological work*" (1923a: 123; my emphasis). Indeed, her work is not primarily about the reality of communities but about their *essences*; that is, it is about what she calls "ontology", not metaphysics. Following Salice and Uemura (2018: 39; see also Salice 2016), however, one could reasonably argue that communities, for Walther, are "higher-order objects" in the strictest technical sense found in the Brentanian tradition, of which Walther is a (remote) member.<sup>20</sup> This might be what Walther has in mind when she (explicitly) describes communities as "higher-order" realities "founded" on other realities.

"Higher-order objects", as Meinong (1971) calls them, are most famously known under the name "Gestalts" in the Brentanian tradition (see Ehrenfels 1890). They are entities that appear concomitantly with an underlying series of elements and their relations, and are taken to be proper realities existing over and above their basis; they are partly independent of their underlying entities, in the sense that they can survive changes in them. For example, a melody is a Gestalt, and is not reducible to the notes it is composed of plus their relations; it is independent of these underlying entities in the sense that the notes can be pitched differently and the melody still remain the same. Interestingly, therefore, realism about Gestalts makes it possible to account for the fact that things can keep their identity despite changes in their components. Applied to social entities, it makes it possible to explain the preservation of the identity of a community, such as a family or a state, despite changes in its membership.<sup>21</sup> If Walther is indeed thinking of this theory, she has a sophisticated, though implicit,

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<sup>20</sup> As indicated, Salice and Uemura 2018 insist on the fact that communities are "founded" entities; though they focus on the foundation of communities on the mental life of their members, not on other foundations, notably that on bodies and cultural products.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed, and in my view different discussion of the identity of social structures by Walther herself, see 1923a: 131–138.

metaphysics of communities.<sup>22</sup> There was at least one other author in the same tradition who developed a view of social structures as higher-order objects, namely, Dietrich von Hildebrand. Similar views are also found in Husserl, although it is less clear to me whether he commits himself to the reality of social structures (in this paragraph I closely follow Salice 2016: 247, which treats of Hildebrand, and to which Salice and Uemura 2018: 39 refer; for Husserl, I rely on Caminada 2019: 269–284; for more on the rich discussions about Gestalts in and around the Brentano School, see Smith 1994: 243–284).

#### **4. Comparison with Marxism**

Let me now compare Walther’s view on the reality of communities with that of Marx on social structures. There are various social entities that play an important role in Marx: society itself to begin with, but also, and perhaps first and foremost, social classes. Does Marx attribute to these social entities their own reality? Walther seems to think so, since she praises Marx and Marxists for putting the focus on “the community as such”, over and above its members (1923a: 98 n. 1), and also says that “certain socialists” (which presumably includes Marxists, as I have argued above) are indeed realists about social structures (1923a: 123). In fact, even if Walther herself did not attribute such a realism to Marxists, nevertheless, given the importance that they play in her intellectual development and in social philosophy more generally, it would still be worth exploring whether they are realists, and if so, which theory – Walther’s or theirs – is more accurate. So how is realism about social structures in the Marxist tradition to be understood?

Since it would require a treatise to determine how Marx himself would answer this question, I will here consider only what his view is usually taken to be. However, one might think that this will be no easier a task than it would be address the issue directly in Marx, given the vast exegetical literature on Marx, from his early readers through to its Russian, Chinese, and East German reception, among many others, not to mention the Frankfurt School and the French structuralist tradition. So here I will select just five interpreters of Marx and compare them to Walther’s reading. My choice is not arbitrary: I will first take three members of the Austro-Marxist tradition, namely Max Adler, Rudolf Hilferding, and Karl Renner, all of whom Walther herself read and who are the figures she quotes when

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<sup>22</sup> Note that this should make it possible to maintain that societies and masses also have a specific sort of “higher-order” reality over and above that of their members and the relations among them. However, Walther says nothing in her treatise about the reality of these two other sorts of social structure.

discussing the non-reducibility of communities to their products or when criticizing exaggeratedly anti-subjectivist theories about communities. This will warrant referring in my inquiry to Marxist authors at least some of whom are also mentioned by Walther; in other words, I will compare her work to people whom she herself considers legitimate readers of Marx (on Walther and Adler, see Mühl 2018a). Another author I will consider is Carol Gould. My reason for choosing her is that to my knowledge she is the only scholar who has written a full monograph on Marx's social ontology.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the last figure I will discuss is a member of the analytic Marxist tradition, namely, Gerald Cohen. My reason for choosing him is that he is a leading figure of analytic Marxism, and that this trend devoted a great deal of effort into presenting Marx's theory, including its most technical aspects, in a clear and argumentative way; this makes it easier to understand exactly what thesis the members of this tradition attribute to Marx, including as regards the reality of social structures. A sceptical reader might argue that my approach will at best lead to a partial representation of the views of Marx and of Marxists on the matter; I would answer that I would already be satisfied if this paper provides a faithful partial representation of Marxism on social ontology.

Let me start with Adler. As noted above, he is quoted by Walther when she discusses Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and the non-reductionism of communities to their cultural products. While it is clear that Adler wants to grant some existence to social structures, it is not so clear that he is as strong a realist as Walther, or whether he is a realist at all. In a text from which Walther quotes (1923a: 28 n. 2), he seems to hold that social structures are made up of relations between human beings, claiming further that these relations are reducible to these human beings themselves:

(...) the true problem of society does not [take] its origin in the connection of a plurality of human beings, but rather it fully exists *only in individual consciousness*. I do not mean this, say, because everything which exists only appears in consciousness, but rather in the precise sense that the social relations and requirements are nothing other than the people and are not anything between or above them (...). (Adler 1904: 380–381)

Note that the passage seems to speak of “societies” not in the restricted sense of sharply delimited goal-oriented groups, but rather in the sense of larger and vague communities of

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<sup>23</sup> In this respect, her work is more focused than Lukács's *Ontology of Social Being* (1984–1986), which, despite its title, is not restricted to social ontology but addresses various metaphysical issues about the general structure of reality, such as idealism vs. materialism, causal vs. teleological explanations, etc.

human beings. For shortly before this passage, Adler speaks of the “social life” (*soziales Leben*) of people. Adler continues, saying (1904: 381) of moral consciousness that a “unity” between various individuals can be given when their cognitions and volitions are only numerically distinct – and thus, I suppose, qualitatively identical. Perhaps this is the kind of understanding he has in mind when he holds that social structures are reducible to their members, that is, that they are gatherings of people who instantiate qualitatively identical mental acts. But this kind of “realism” has a strong reductionist flavour: it does not attribute a reality to a community as such, nor does it even admit the existence of relations between its members; rather, it reduces these relations to the subjects themselves and their intrinsic (i.e., non-relational) properties. This seems to me to be confirmed by a later text by Adler (quoted by Mühl 2018a: 73):

(...) the social is neither something between humans nor above them, but it is in them, such that the social relation (...) is already completely given in every individual consciousness.  
(Adler 1913: 6; trans. Mühl 2018a: 73)

The social, as Adler says, is not something “above” humans, and the “social relation” is “completely given in every individual consciousness”. He might thus be opposed to the idea of the “autonomous life” of commodities, but he seems not to be a notable realist about social structures. I must confess that I do not know whether Walther saw him as a realist, and if she did, to what extent; but she knew the last text quoted, which she herself quotes in a manuscript (see Mühl 2018a: 73), so I tend to think that she did not see Adler as a strong realist.

Gould’s account seems more promising. In fact, she states that a society is “real”, and even that it is “more than the sum of its parts”, for it is made not just of its parts, that is, its individuals, but of these individuals plus their relations:

And to speak of society, for Marx, is to speak of the product and the structure constituted by individuals in given relations. It thus consists fundamentally of the relations that these individuals establish among themselves and the institutionalized forms of these relations. Thus society is a constituted entity and not a basic entity; it exists only in and through the individuals who constitute it. This is not to say that because society is such a generated entity it is a mere appearance or a conceptual abstraction. Rather, it is a real entity like the individuals who constitute it. Furthermore, as the product of the interactions of these individuals, society is not understood by Marx as an aggregate or sum of parts, but rather as a

totality or whole that is more than the sum of its parts. As such, society cannot be understood simply by understanding the individual entities that compose it. It requires beyond this an understanding of the interrelations among them. (Gould 1978: 36)

What Gould seems to be defending here is a stronger form of realism than that found in Adler. On her view, a society is not just the sum of its members, but *more* than that: it is these individuals *plus* their relations. As such, a society is a *whole*, made up precisely of the individuals and their relations.

Interestingly, Cohen defends a similar view, not about societies in general, but about classes in particular:

A person's class is established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations, however difficult it may be to identify such places neatly. His consciousness, culture, and politics do not enter the *definition* of his class position. (Cohen 2000: 73)

Cohen's view seems close to Gould's: a social structure is made up of its members plus their relations. For Cohen, however, the relations are narrowed down, at least as regards classes: it is not just any relations that count, but "ownership" relations. Note that although a class is not defined by the consciousness of its members, Cohen points out a further distinction in Marx between a "class-in-itself", which is not conscious of itself, and a "class-for-itself", which *is* conscious (2000: 76). To be sure, an important point here is that a class in Marx can be constituted without any consciousness on the part of its members. I suppose that Walther would agree that one can divide social reality into economic categories such as classes-in-themselves, but these are not the kind of entity she is interested in, nor are her analyses meant to be about them. She is interested rather in entities such as classes-for-themselves, which clearly include a mental dimension (for they are conscious).<sup>24</sup> So, for Cohen, a class-for-itself is made up of people who are interrelated via "ownership" relations and are conscious of themselves, but it is nothing over and above the people that make it up.

Hilferding seems to have a similar "relationist" position about classes, which are made up of their members and their relations:

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<sup>24</sup> Walther herself uses the distinction between communities-in-themselves and for-themselves, but in a distinct fashion. Communities-in-themselves are given as soon as people unify and have we-experiences, but communities-for-themselves require an additional step, namely, an awareness of the "supra-individual" community on the part of its members (1923a: 96 and Mühl 2018b: 23–24; see also 1923a: 81–82).

The capitalist mode of production (...) socializes human beings to a greater extent than any of the earlier modes of production; that is, it makes its individual existence dependent on the social relations in which it is placed. It does so in an antagonistic way through the production of the great classes, in that it makes the social performance of labour the function of one of the classes, and the enjoyment of the products of this work the function of the other. (Hilferding 1974: 180)

The relevant relations are those of "...working for..." and "...benefiting from the work of..." (see also 1974: 141). Thus, classes are constituted by the fact that some people work for other people, while these other people benefit from the work of the former; for example, the proletariat works for the bourgeoisie, which benefits from that work. Here, in contrast to Cohen, the relations seem to define the *relata*, for the "individual existence" of human beings seems to depend on the relations through which they are socialized into classes. Nonetheless, the class does not seem to be something distinct from its members and their relations.

Finally, let me come to my last Austro-Marxist author, namely, Renner. Renner seems to have a stronger form of realism than these other authors. He claims the following:

(...) humanity is not a mechanically added sum of individuals. The human individual does not exist prior to or outside the species; it is determined by the species, and indeed in a much different and stricter way than any other organic being. The human being as a social being behaves totally differently from the mere abstraction individual (*die blosse Abstraktion Individuum*). This is an empty abstraction; it does not exist, except in its representation. It is physiologically determined through an infinite series of past generations, a mere point of passage between changing generations. It is in its psychism nothing other than a crossing point of various directions of social thought, sensation, and will. Society dictates to it in language the forms of thought, and in the transmitted ideologies on the one hand, and in particular social facts [it dictates] the content of thought; from childhood onwards, it drills it into its will and prescribes valuations to it. (Renner 1904: 151)

In this text, it seems that society is not constituted simply by individuals, nor by individuals plus their relations; rather individuals themselves are constituted by society, or by the species (the difference between the two is not clear). Note that despite this broad claim, there is no clue as to how to frame the nature of a society from a metaphysical point of view. At any rate, this text is quoted by Walther (1923a: 88 n. 1), so Renner was perhaps the person Walther had

in mind when praising Marx and Marxists for their objectivism about social structures (despite her rejection of Renner's excessively strong anti-subjectivism, as noted above).

So, let us sum up and evaluate these views. For Adler, a society is nothing more than its individual members and their relations, but these relations themselves are reduced to the members of the society. This position does not seem to me to be a realism about social structures, but rather a reductionism, since it admits only individual subjects and their intrinsic (i.e., non-relational) properties. Gould, Cohen, and Hilferding, by contrast, seem to hold that a social structure in Marx – such as society or a social class – is made up of the members of the social structure plus their relations. This could be seen as a sort of realism, in the sense that a society is not *just* its members, but these members *plus* some other entities; it is a “whole” made up of these elements, as Gould claims. But I am inclined to say that this is a *weak* form of realism, since a social structure is still made up of its members plus some of *their* properties. And calling this a “whole” does not as such provide a stronger sort of realism, for after all, the members alone taken together are also a whole. In that sense, Adler too admits that societies are “wholes”. A strong realism seems to me to entail that a social structure is neither its members alone nor its members plus some of *their* properties, but rather some *other* entity. In fact, strong realism seems to me to require that a social structure be treated as a unity, that is, a unitary reality, and not as a plurality. This is the correlate of the fact that we refer to social structures via singular determiners: we speak of *the* family, *the* state, *the* nation. Consequently, strong realism should accept that there is indeed *one* thing such as *the* family, etc., to which we refer, and not a plurality of things. Perhaps this is the sort of view that Renner had in mind, but he does not provide any metaphysical tools with which to understand how exactly society's unity is to be understood. One might wonder how Renner could avoid making a society a mere sum of human beings with qualitatively identical but numerically distinct mental acts, just as it is in Adler; indeed, without further metaphysical developments he might be committed to this view. But this is obviously not a strong form of realism, but a falling back into reductionism.

A strong form of realism – which treats social structures as unitary entities – is indeed defended by Walther, and she seemingly has the tools to do so. Interestingly, in her metaphysics there are levels of reality; objects and their relations on the one hand, and higher-order entities on the other. This allows us to say that a community is not just its members plus their relations, but some (higher-order) distinct unitary reality. Perhaps it is a shortcoming of the Marxist tradition that it lacks metaphysical tools that are sufficiently developed to allow for such complex theoretical framings. The Brentanian tradition, on which Walther seemingly

relies, has the theory of Gestalts or “higher-order objects”, which frames various levels of reality; it thus avoids falling back into reductionism. Interestingly, as pointed out above, the Gestalt view allows for some independence of the higher-order object from its underlying basis, in the sense that it can persist as the same object even when the underlying elements change. Applied to social ontology, this explains why a social structure can keep its identity while its members change. This cannot be accounted for if one explains the structure as the sum of its members and their relations or as a whole made up of them, as at least some Marxists seem to do.

In general, it is not a surprise that phenomenologists have stronger ontological tools than Marxists, or at least stronger than those of the early Marxists, since the revival of a realist, technical ontology very much à la scholasticism is due to Brentano. Ontology thus understood, which explores the very nature of substances, qualities, relations, etc., had been largely neglected since Descartes’s rejection of scholastic philosophy and Kant’s turn to idealism; this might explain why Marx and (at least the early) Marxists lacked the relevant ontological tools in their analyses of the various aspects of reality (the idea that Brentanian philosophy reverts to traditional ontology, against the Kantian tradition, is defended in Münch 2004: 232; on the relation of Gestalt theory and social ontology in the phenomenological tradition, see again Salice and Uemura 2018, Salice 2016, and Caminada 2019). Note that Walther, just by holding that a community is a “higher-order unity” (*Einheit höherer Art*), which exists over and above its members and the relations among them and which is “founded” on its members, already has a better ontology than Marxists, inasmuch as she posits levels of reality and a relation of foundation, even if she had not also introduced “objects of higher-order” in the more sophisticated sense of Gestalts.

One objection to my criticism of Marxist social ontology would certainly be this: a strict Marxist would avoid speculating too much about these issues and inventing metaphysical tools such as “higher-order objects”, for metaphysics might be seen as part of the “superstructure” of our capitalist societies, that is, as a theory which simply mirrors (or perhaps even hides) the current economic situation (and thus class domination), rather than matching reality in any way (on superstructure, see Marx and Engels 2017, among others). I would answer that it is not clear to what extent Marxists can have any kind of account of social structures without using metaphysical categories, and so the objection would hold for their account as well. Recall that Gould, Cohen, and Hilferding use a well-established metaphysical category for framing their views about social structures, namely, that of *relations*. So why not “higher-order objects”? In general, I can hardly see how Marxists could



avoid using basic metaphysical categories such as object, property, relation, event, process, and causality, if they want to have any kind of theory (broadly understood) of reality (broadly understood). Of course, it is one thing to say this, and another to provide the exact list of these basic categories.

## Conclusion

Walther has a complex understanding of social structures. Following the Marxist tradition, she acknowledges that communities are distinct from their members and the relations among them. But though she allows for their reality as *sui generis* entities, she also takes great care to identify the exact kind of mental acts on which they are founded. She can provide an accurate metaphysical account of communities, with a strong form of realism, and levels of reality, by claiming that they are “higher-order” unitary realities. However, her account is also based on fine-grained phenomenological descriptions of our mental life: she identifies specific kinds of mental act, namely, unifications and we-experiences, in which she grounds communities. Interestingly, she claims that such acts are part of our background mental life, or our self, rather than part of our foreground mental act, or “I”. In addition, she grounds communities in the bodies of their members, in line with historical materialism, and in “cultural products”, a notion she borrows from Husserl.

Walther’s theory of communities thus exhibits an interesting combination of her two philosophical pedigrees: her initial Marxist training and her later studies in phenomenology. Compared to Marxism, her account seems to have two important advantages. The metaphysics of Marxism seems to be restricted to entities such as subjects and their properties and relations, and to lack the richness of the metaphysics of “higher-order” entities. The psychology of Marxism certainly lacks any fine-grained phenomenological analysis such as that developed by Walther, which was based on the many years of inquiries made from the first-person point of view in the phenomenological tradition. Her theoretical project thus draws on Marxism and improves on it by combining it with phenomenology. As such, it anticipates several crucial discussions in the twentieth century on the relations between subjectivity and social structures, providing various novel but still underexploited theoretical tools for framing these relations. There is no doubt that her work deserves much more attention in the history of philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

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