

Adorno, Marx, and abstract domination

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Abstract: This article reconstructs and defends Theodor Adorno's social theory by motivating the central role of abstract domination within it. Whereas critics such as Axel Honneth have charged Adorno with adhering to a reductive model of personal domination, I argue that the latter rather understands domination as a structural and de-individualized feature of capitalist society. If Adorno's social theory is to be explanatory, however, it must account for the source of the abstractions that dominate modern individuals and, in particular, that of value. While such an account remains undeveloped in Adorno, Marx provides resources for its development, in positing the constitution of value neither in production nor exchange alone, but in the social totality. This article argues that Marx's account is compatible with Adorno's, and that it may be used to render Adorno's theory of domination more credible on explanatory grounds.

Keywords: Adorno, Marx, abstract domination, Honneth, capitalism, exchange, labor, totality

Introduction

As a social theorist, Theodor Adorno has long been under eclipse. Beginning in the 1970s his social theory received successive rounds of criticism, the most decisive of which were articulated by Jürgen Habermas and, later, Axel Honneth. Such criticism effected a paradigm shift in Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer had, arguably, espoused a Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of the subject, many of today's critical theorists instead employ communicative and recognitive frameworks to ground their own normative theories.¹ Interest in Adorno's ethical and aesthetic philosophy has recently increased yet, with few exceptions, this interest has not extended to his writings on society.² On the whole, Adorno's social theory remains all but moot.

The present article reconsiders the merits of this social theory, with special attention paid to Adorno's theory of domination. According to Honneth, this theory reductively conceptualizes

domination as the unmediated result of social administrators' conscious action. As I shall argue, Honneth's critique is off the mark: Adorno does not offer such a theory of personal domination, but rather one of *abstract* domination. To motivate this argument I elucidate the Marxist principles on which Adorno relies. However, these principles often remain implicit or ambiguously formulated in Adorno's work. Thus, in order to provide a convincing reconstruction, I shall reread this work through the value critique tradition of Marxism, a tradition that Adorno famously anticipates and inspires.³ Of particular interest here is the issue of abstraction. Given that Adorno's is a theory of "real abstraction," how are we to conceive of the constitution of such abstraction in capitalist modernity? What, in other words, grounds a domination which, *contra* Honneth, remains abstract and impersonal? By appealing at length to the work of Marx and contemporary commentators, I hope to elucidate the abstract ground of domination, and thus provide Adorno with the further resources he needs to vindicate his social theory.

I begin by briefly summarizing some general criticisms of Adorno's social theory, before turning to a more detailed summary of Honneth's charge of theoretical reductionism. My subsequent reconstruction of Adorno's theory of domination begins with a brief appraisal of the status of abstraction therein. I then focus more narrowly on the site of the constitution of value, and canvass exchange and production respectively as candidates. Here I draw on *Capital, Vol. I* and the *Grundrisse* to fill in the gaps of Adorno's account. I conclude by advocating for an understanding of value as mutually constituted in exchange *and* production. Value, I argue, must be understood as a functional moment within the capitalist totality. Such an account of value remains implicit in Adorno's social theory. By making it explicit, we may more convincingly explain the totalizing nature of domination, and vindicate Adorno from Honneth's critique.

General criticisms

Of particular concern to critics of Adorno is the latter's apparent disregard for empirically informed social theory. Adorno had always been at best ambivalent to Horkheimer's program for the Institute for Social Research, that of incorporating philosophy and contemporary social science for an interdisciplinary analysis of capitalist society (Honneth 1991, 36). But more questionable than this ambivalence is his eventual embrace of a philosophy of history, of which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is taken as paradigmatic. Here Adorno and Horkheimer expound a "totalizing view" of universal history as the progressive domination of both internal and external nature (38). For critics, this philosophico-historical view is taken to generalize and idealize Lukács's theory of reification.⁴ Reification is now no longer the concrete consequence of the generalization of the commodity-form, as in Lukács. Instead it becomes an eternalized structure of instrumental reason, abstracted from any genesis in particular historical circumstances (Habermas 1984, 378-79). The "profound ahistoricism" involved in projecting contemporary psychoanalytic theories of pathology back into the dawn of civilization renders the explanatory worth of the account suspect (Benhabib 1986, 168).

If this account is inadequate as an explanation of history, so it is further inadequate to explain contemporary society. Honneth thus charges Adorno and Horkheimer with uncritically applying their framework of instrumental reason—which, as Honneth interprets it, purports to provide a "genealogical interpretation of National Socialist totalitarianism"—to contemporary post-War capitalist society (1991, 58). The original philosophy of history is discredited as historically and anthropologically "thin," and so its application to contemporary society is further suspect. Adorno's problems are compounded by his apparent lack of empirical sources. Rather

than appeal to empirical social science, he seems to base many claims on philosophical interpretations of arbitrarily chosen texts and cultural artifacts.

There is general agreement that Adorno's method follows from his critique of the ideological function of the sciences. Given that the conceptualizing practices of science—including the social sciences—are a form of instrumental reason, then the mere, unproblematized employment of such sciences will be disallowed from a theory that aims at the critical diagnosis of instrumental reason (Honneth 1991, 60). Yet even in his turn to negative dialectics and aesthetics, as the only conceptual practices sufficient to grasp some minimal truth content, these critics still conceive Adorno as providing a kind of social theory; Adorno is apparently convinced that social theory only *is* possible through such methodological channels. That Adorno abandons “the goal of theoretical knowledge” (Habermas 1984, 385) does not excuse him from being scrutinized as a social theorist, insofar as he is still engaged in what *he* takes to be legitimate social analysis. As I shall document in the subsequent section, some of Adorno's harshest criticisms come from Honneth, who still interprets Adorno's project as one of social analysis, however deficient the latter proves to be.

My vindication of this project shall not proceed with the consideration, for example, that Adorno's is actually *not* a conventional social theory, and thus not subject to the same standards typically applied to the latter.⁵ This is because I consider those commentators correct who understand Adorno's project as, in large part, a project of social analysis. It seems unlikely that all of the work which treats of society, the culture industry, and capitalism should *not* be taken as aiming for some non-arbitrary interpretive or explanatory significance. Accordingly, I will proceed under the assumption that Adorno's social theory is intended to have some non-arbitrary explanatory content, and that the critiques of his social theory do not simply miss the target by

imposing on Adorno explanatory goals that he never had. I shall now consider one of these critiques in greater detail.

Honneth's critique

According to Honneth, Adorno's account of domination results in "the definitive repression of the social from the social analysis of critical theory" (1991, 72). I shall first say what the social is, for Honneth—what Honneth understands as so strikingly absent—before turning to how he believes it is "repressed." Accordingly, the social contains "the patterns of group-specific value orientations and everyday interpretations that, as horizons of meaning, guide the individual in working through the flood of media information" (80). As Honneth further writes, this realm is that of "the intermediary sphere of the everyday communicative praxis of social groups" (81). One way to characterize this sphere is negatively. For Honneth, the social will be a realm in which thought and action are not determined exogenously by forms of domination, but rather endogenously from free and intersubjective recognitive and communicative practices. Thus, positively articulated, the social delimits a realm of *autonomy*. Within it, action is governed by the self-understandings of individuals and social groups; it is not governed automatically by the meanings or cultural logics of identity-thinking. Honneth doesn't give a positive argument for why such an autonomous sphere of action is actually present in contemporary society. Instead he seems to think that its existence is simply apparent.

Honneth views Adorno's repression of this social sphere as generally following from the philosophy of history developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet he also believes it is specifically entailed by the apparently privileged place of Friedrich Pollock in Adorno's account. Thus, according to Honneth, Pollock's theory of state capitalism enables Adorno to

conceptualize contemporary capitalism as having entered a new form of organization; capitalism is no longer characterized by the free competition of its earlier, liberal phase. Rather, under state capitalism, economic trends result from the policies of bureaucratic state institutions in alliance with monopoly capital. The frenzy of the market is replaced by a “command economy” whose agents directly manage or administer economic and social spheres (Honneth 1991, 72).

According to Honneth, Adorno draws on this theory of state capitalism from the early 1940s through the rest of his career.

In Adorno’s social theory, the repression of the social is thus determined by the mechanisms of state capitalist administration. When Honneth refers to the “end of mediation,” he indicates the unmediated relation between economic and cultural administrators, and the individuals over whom they exercise social control. Adorno’s “administered society” is thus unified across economic and cultural dimensions. In the same way that the economy is planned, so is the culture industry, which is itself essential for the continued subjugation of individuals. Describing his interpretation of the latter sphere, Honneth thus attributes to Adorno a “theory of manipulation that reasons directly from the informational content of the products of the culture industry to its individual effects and thus assumes an especially crude form” (1991, 81). Social action is not mediated by the self-understandings of agents, or the practices of identification and recognition within social groups. Nor is action mediated in the realm of the liberal market, given that centralized planning has replaced competition between individuals and firms. Instead, action is immediately administered. The theoretical result, for Honneth, is a strong reductionism and one-dimensionality of social theory. Society, on this account, is flattened to mere administration.

Though exercised through bureaucratic structures, the species of domination described here by Honneth appears foremost as *personal* domination—that is, the direct domination of

individuals by other individuals. Accordingly, I submit that Honneth sees in personal domination the basic mechanism of the exercise of power in Adorno's social theory. This is not to claim that such domination, for Honneth, isn't also mediated by differential distributions of property, social power, and status. Nevertheless, within the constraints of such mediations, Honneth still appears to impute a framework in which domination is the result of mostly free and self-conscious action by individuals. Not structures but individuals are here the foremost agents of domination.

To this sort of personal domination we may counterpose *abstract* domination. Following Moishe Postone's careful elaboration of the latter concept, we may tentatively understand the latter as characterized foremost by its structural and impersonal nature. Here capitalist structures, rather than individuals, are the primary agents of domination. As Postone writes, this domination "is grounded in the value form of wealth itself, a form of social wealth that confronts living labors (the workers) as a structurally alien and dominant power" (1993, 30). Accordingly, abstract domination "refers to the domination of people by abstract, quasi-independent structures of social relations, mediated by commodity-determined labor..." (126). I will have more to say about abstract domination below. For now, however, it is important only to note that there is another model available for use in interpreting Adorno's account. Honneth, however, claims that domination is not in this manner abstract for Adorno; instead it is perpetrated and upheld by the conscious actions of the administrative class.

Numerous passages in *The Critique of Power* provide evidence for this characterization of Honneth's interpretation. For example, Honneth claims that "the necessary presuppositions for the integration of society as a whole can be created 'from above'—that is, through the planning and manipulative activities of a ruling administration" (1991, 93). Here Honneth constructs a vision of individual bureaucrats who are personally responsible for the administration of society,

along with the domination that characterizes that society. Honneth further writes that Adorno's sociological concept of domination is structurally equivalent to that which is used in his account of the domination of *nature* and of totalitarianism, and may in all cases be conceived along a model of "purposive rational control" of individuals and a "one-sided relation of social domination." Thus Honneth claims, "It is, above all, the categories of 'pressure,' 'force,' 'training,' and 'manipulation' from which the conceptual apparatus of his model is built—concepts which, as a whole, describe the effects of an instrumentally acting subject upon things or living beings" (94). Such remarks indicate Honneth's neglect of an alternative approach more attuned to the abstract dimension of domination.⁶ Accordingly, we may summarize his critique as follows: Adorno is committed to a reductive theory of society that understands social integration as the unmediated result of the self-conscious actions of social planners and administrators. Social mediation—and the social more generally—disappear because such administrators are able to effect the automatic and unreflecting subordination of individuals. Liberal market capitalism has been replaced by "state capitalism" and as such both economic and cultural spheres are unitarily "administered" top-down by a small class of powerful individuals.

In now turning to a direct consideration of Adorno, my aim will be to challenge this interpretation. I will begin by motivating the claim that *some* notion of abstraction is central to Adorno's social theory, and that a key aim therein is to explain how abstract and alienated social structures preclude autonomy—not merely for the oppressed, but also for oppressors. I shall then turn to a more thorough examination of the abstraction of value and its social constitution.

Abstraction

We may begin with a passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that directly contradicts

Honneth's interpretation:

Although the operations of the mechanism appear to be planned by those who supply the data, the culture industry, the planning is in fact imposed on the industry by the inertia of a society irrational despite all its rationalization, and this calamitous tendency, in passing through the agencies of business, takes on the shrewd intentionality peculiar to them... [C]lassification has already been preempted by the schematism of production. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 98)

Adorno and Horkheimer here dismiss the idea that solely culture industry executives and administrators are responsible for cultural planning.⁷ This planning does not originate in the decisions of such individuals. Rather it is "imposed" on them by the structural requirements of production. They must satisfy these requirements, even if they do so while modifying programs or policies to match their particular interests. This passage thus exhibits the claim that Adorno elsewhere articulates as follows: "oppression has become anonymous" (1987, 116). Before exploring what the "inertia of an irrational society" means, I will briefly cite a few other passages that clearly challenge Honneth's view. My aim here is not to fully reconstruct Adorno's theory, but just to textually motivate my challenge.

Accordingly, in a later essay Adorno writes, "Above and beyond all specific forms of social differentiation, the abstraction implicit in the market system represents the domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership" (Adorno 1969, 148). Here it is not individual administrators who are the agents of domination, but rather an *abstraction*. Domination is not the work of individuals, but rather of society, of the general. And another relevant claim: "The impotence of the individual in the face of the totality is the drastic expression of the power of the exchange relation" (Adorno 1987, 120). As in the preceding quotations, here Adorno calls attention not to the success of administrators in securing the subordination of individuals, but rather to that of an abstraction, the exchange relation. Of

course, Adorno never hesitates to condemn the participation of individuals in processes of domination. Yet such passages indicate that there is a broader, more “structural” process at work here, one non-reducible to the actions of individual actors.

“Inertia of an irrational society”; “the abstraction implicit in the market system”; “the power of the exchange relation”—all these phrases reflect what I take to be Adorno’s general preoccupation with explaining the categorial structure of an alienated, modern society, of an enlightenment that has escaped the control of its agents. One could argue that the foremost aim of Adorno’s social philosophy is to critique a state of affairs in which individuals—whether those at the top or the bottom of the social hierarchy—have been deprived of autonomy, becoming instead mere means to ends that lie outside themselves.⁸ Society, according to Adorno, is beyond the control of its agents, governed instead by impersonal laws which dictate the subordination of individuals to “the abstraction implicit in the market system.” I shall now begin a close examination of the nature of this abstraction which Adorno takes to enact abstract domination. My burden is to demonstrate not only that Adorno’s concept of domination is misinterpreted by Honneth. I must further demonstrate that it is convincing. Accordingly, the goal of the subsequent discussion will be to say (1) what abstraction is, for Adorno, (2) where and how it is constituted, and (3) how it dominates individuals.

We may begin to address (1) by noting that, like his contemporary, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and like his students, Helmut Reichelt and Hans-Georg Backhaus, Adorno’s social theory operationalizes a concept of real abstraction. Adorno doesn’t actually use the term, “real abstraction,” which comes from Sohn-Rethel, though he clearly is working with a similar concept.⁹ As a first pass, then, real abstraction refers to the idea that in capitalist society, there are abstractions, categories, or social forms that aren’t merely intellectual projections of agents.

In other words, there are abstractions that have universal validity and that aren't therefore mere illusions—examples of these include the commodity, abstract labor, and value. The reality of these abstractions consists in their determining social function. For example, according to Marx, commodities express a certain amount of value, whose “substance” is abstract labor and whose magnitude is determined by the socially necessary labor-time required for their production (Marx 1976a, 129). Whether or not agents are even aware of categories such as abstract labor or value, their actions contribute to the reproduction of a capitalist economy in fact guided by such abstractions. To lower prices—a requirement of competition—capitalists must improve productivity, while this eventually leads to the reduction of the time socially necessary for the production of a given commodity, and thus to a reduction of its value. Meanwhile, the labor of workers provides the substance of this value in the form of abstract labor, even if, to workers themselves, their labor is experienced only as “concrete.”¹⁰ Adorno indicates his broad commitment to such a Marxian view of real abstraction when he writes, in a passage arguing against the nominalist deflation of universals to mere “soap bubbles,” that “Marx’s Hegelian-trained theory of the law of value” is in fact realized by capitalism “over the heads of men” (Adorno 2007, 199).¹¹

Before reconstructing Adorno’s theory of abstract domination below, I will first turn to Adorno’s account of the social constitution of abstraction. Here and through the rest of this article, I will focus above all on the abstraction of *value*. The choice of this focus is motivated in part by its centrality to Adorno, for whom value, following Marx, provides the standard by which otherwise incommensurable commodities are exchanged in capitalist modernity.¹² I have also chosen this focus because it tracks a long-running debate within Marxian scholarship over the constitution of value, while reading Adorno through the theoretical options posed by this debate

may cast further light on his own position. Here there have been two “takes”: “a commodity-centered and a labor-centered take on real abstraction” (Toscano 2008, 286). Accordingly, many thinkers have understood the abstraction of value to be foremost the outcome of the *exchange* of commodities. Thinkers who have held this view include Sohn-Rethel, Reichelt, Lucio Colletti, and Michael Heinrich. The labor-centered take, on the other hand, supposes that value is constituted foremost in production. Thinkers who subscribe to this latter view include Postone, Christopher Arthur, and Roberto Finelli. Importantly, commitment to the labor-centered take, for example, does not preclude attention to the necessity of exchange, and *vice versa*. In fact, most of the thinkers listed above understand abstraction not solely as an outcome of an isolated economic sphere, but rather as essentially connected to the capitalist totality *per se*. Accordingly, the theoretical debate should not be seen as that between two entirely opposed positions, but rather one that presents a spectrum of views that put relatively more emphasis on exchange or production. Expressing what is in fact a fairly mainstream view (even if there remains significant disagreement on the details) Michael Heinrich thus writes, “The social relationship that is expressed in value and the magnitude of value is constituted in production *and* circulation, so that the ‘either/or’ question is senseless” (2012, 54).¹³

While a close reading of his work suggests a commitment to an account such that abstraction is likewise constituted through exchange *and* production, Adorno ultimately offers no fully developed view of his own. This technical problem did not preoccupy him. Nonetheless, I submit that the explanatory strength of Adorno’s account in fact *depends* on its supplementation by an answer to this problem. Absent this answer, Adorno remains unable to explain *how* abstract domination is generated and sustained. Without development and defense, the idea of “domination by abstractions” (Osborne 2020, 314) may appear unjustified at best, and mystical

at worst. Accordingly, a careful account of the genesis of abstraction will provide not only the means to contest Honneth's critique but further, the resources for an Adornian social theory satisfying in its own right. By arguing that Adorno in fact understands value as constituted through *both* spheres, I will also be able to challenge the claim that his apparently exclusive focus on *pre-capitalist* exchange—pursued by way of abstracting exchange from capitalist production and reproduction—renders his social theory inadequate for understanding capitalist modernity.¹⁴

To fill out Adorno's account, an appeal to Marx will prove necessary. My reading strategy consists in the following. I begin by considering the common interpretation of Adorno as foremost a thinker of exchange. I examine Adorno's work for evidence of this interpretation, before turning to a consideration of the relationship between production and value. Here I call attention to Adorno's generally neglected characterization of labor as the basic mediation of social life, before appealing to Marx in order to better inform such a view. I conclude by considering the mutual necessity of exchange and labor in the genesis of value, in both Marx and Adorno. I explain how Adorno's concept of totality, aided by this account of the genesis of value, helps to explain the full extent of domination in modernity.

Exchange

Adorno's various writings are suffused with references to exchange in general, and to the "exchange principle" in particular. Accordingly, as Jürgen Ritsert has written, "One could almost describe the principle of exchange as the central theme of Adorno's critical theory" (Ritsert 1998, 324.).¹⁵ On a broad level, surveying the general sweep of Adorno's thought, this principle loosely serves as a figure for instrumental reason and identity thinking as such, which are

foremost characterized by the subsumption of the particular under the universal. As J. M. Bernstein contends, “The exchange principle is not only a social exemplification of the universal over the particular, and hence an instantiation of identity thinking, it is its model and fullest expression” (2001, 238n-39n).¹⁶ The subordination of concrete usefulness to exchange value would, on this more general level, be seen as the “fullest expression” of that identity thinking whose diagnosis and critique marks a significant continuity across Adorno’s theoretical and more sociological writings alike.

On another level, however, exchange does not remain a mere figure or instantiation, but takes on further explanatory weight as the foremost mediating mechanism of modern society. This mechanism is aptly described by Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva: “exchange [for Adorno] is the synthetic principle that immanently determines the connection of every social fact. Exchange realizes the ‘objective’ social connection. It is the principle of mediation that guarantees the reproduction of society through a process of abstraction” (2015, 25). The reduction of products to a universal equivalent thus establishes determinate social relations between individuals, even if these relations appear—in Marx’s classic formulation of commodity fetishism—as relations between things. When exchange is interpreted on this explanatory level, it may be viewed as the primary mechanism through which individuals are integrated into the social whole. This interpretation of the significance of exchange accordingly lends causal priority to exchange in the determination of social life. Adorno’s term “exchange society” may seem to designate precisely this priority. Here, Reichelt’s claim would be apt: “Adorno therefore assumes that the whole economy is to be developed out of a principle—the exchange principle” (2007, 6).

Implied by this interpretation is the claim that, for Adorno, value is realized in exchange: exchange mediates social life by realizing value as the universal equivalent of commodities and commodity-producing labor. Two passages that seem to confirm this view read as follows:

Exchange itself is a process of abstraction. Whether human beings [*die Menschen*] know it or not, by entering into a relationship of exchange and reducing different use-values to labour-value they actualise a real conceptual operation socially. (Adorno 2018, 156)

The exchange principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average labor-time, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Exchange is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. (Adorno 2007, 146, translation modified)

While his terminology is somewhat imprecise, such passages¹⁷ appear to consistently maintain that the abstraction of value (whose magnitude is determined by socially necessary labor-time) is ultimately the result of exchange. It is in exchange that the specific character of use-values is “reduced” to a magnitude of socially necessary labor-time. As a “process of abstraction,” exchange is thus itself responsible for the abstract commensurability and identity of otherwise incommensurable entities. Yet these passages are perhaps most revealing when one considers what they leave out: here and elsewhere, Adorno accordingly neglects a direct consideration of production as a similarly constitutive sphere for the realization of value. In these, his most specific and detailed statements on the problem, it is only exchange which is viewed as the mechanism for the realization of value. Adorno admittedly notes that socially necessary labor-time provides the universal unit of exchange, yet he neglects to consider whether value should therefore be considered to result from production. On this reading, Adorno would be in rough agreement with thinkers such as Sohn-Rethel, who claimed that “It is the action of exchange, and the action alone, that is abstract” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 26). If this interpretation is correct, then the key explanatory principle of Adorno’s social theory could be found in exchange.

Up to here, such a reading thus provides grounds for the common interpretation of Adorno as foremost a thinker of exchange. It should be noted that Adorno's reflections on exchange follow at least in part from his reading of Marx, and that in Marx himself there are passages which seem to endorse Adorno's own view.¹⁸ However, the apparently *exclusive* focus on exchange—which, I submit, is not found in Marx—may itself be rendered more legible when one considers what appears to be the lasting influence of Pollock on Adorno's thought. Without doubt, this influence recedes in Adorno's later work, from which the above quotations concerning exchange and value have been drawn. Nonetheless his work of the 1940s clearly bears Pollock's mark.¹⁹ During this period Adorno seems to believe, with Pollock, that capitalism had passed from a liberal phase of competition to one of monopoly and state administration, which Pollock labeled "state capitalism." Most basically, state capitalism is characterized by "the supersession of the economic sphere by the political sphere" (Postone 2004, 173). This entails more specifically, as Pollock writes, that "The market is deposed from its controlling function to coordinate production and exchange" (1982, 72-73). In the place of the market, state agencies take on the primary coordinating and stabilizing function within the economy. The supersession of the economic sphere thus entails the effective abolition of the market.

As Postone (1993, 2004) has argued, Pollock's theory of capitalism establishes the essence of capitalism not in production, but rather in the market—this can be inferred from Pollock's suggestion that with the abolition of the market, capitalist economic laws "disappear" (Pollock 1982, 73). As Postone has written, "This approach ... implies an interpretation of the Marxian category of value ... solely in terms of the market. In other words, Pollock understands the economic sphere and, implicitly, the Marxian categories only in terms of the mode of

distribution” (Postone 1993, 97). In Adorno’s later thought, which seems to distance itself from the state capitalism thesis,²⁰ the persistence of Pollock’s influence may instead be located here, in the continued emphasis on the market, or exchange, as the essence of capitalism, or as the apparent site for the realization of value. Adorno does *not* contend that political domination displaces economic domination, or that the economy is foremost administered by state agencies. Instead, as we have seen, Adorno is committed to the view that real abstractions generated by the economy come to mediate and dominate the lives of individuals. Nonetheless, Adorno does seem tempted by the view that value is foremost a result of exchange, a position that would endorse at least that dimension of Pollock’s theory which likewise supposed the primacy of the market in the functioning of capitalism.²¹

While rendering more legible Adorno’s persistent emphasis on exchange, such an appeal to Pollock, however, hardly provides an exhaustive explanation of Adorno’s full views on the economy. Not only does Adorno, following Marx, clearly understand domination as abstract, and not as the outcome of conscious administrative planning which oversees an otherwise superseded market. Additionally, in Adorno’s work of the 1950s and 1960s, an increasing emphasis on *labor* becomes apparent. Here labor is taken to exact its own form of abstract domination. This increasing emphasis indicates that there is more to Adorno’s story about abstraction than just exchange, and that a full recounting of this story will require an examination of his—and Marx’s—accounts of labor. I now turn to each of these accounts in turn.

Labor: Adorno

Any attempt to read Adorno as privileging exchange at the expense of production needs to reckon with, among other texts, *Hegel: Three Studies*. In fact, the typical *neglect* of this text may

go some way in explaining why he is so often viewed as exclusively prioritizing exchange. *Hegel: Three Studies* compiles two lectures presented in the 1950s, and an essay written in the early 1960s.²² There Adorno charges Hegel with disavowing spirit's constitutive dependence on labor. In place of Hegel's idealism, Adorno proposes a materialist understanding of society in which socially-organized labor itself mediates the social totality. Adorno, in other words, wants to replace a notion of the self-determining subject with labor as the categorial core of (1) subjective reflection and (2) capitalist society. Forms of thought do not originate in the transcendental subject—here Adorno criticizes Kant—but rather in the social organization of labor. In this text we find, then, a shift in emphasis. Rather than exchange *per se* being described as the site of abstraction and mediation, labor seems to have this role. Thus Adorno provides the following programmatic statement: “There is nothing in the world that shall not manifest itself to human beings solely through social labor.... [N]othing is known but what has passed through labor.” The change in emphasis is further apparent in a prescriptive claim: “a humankind free of labor would be free of domination” (Adorno 1993, 26). The latter indicates that emancipation requires not (only) the abolition of exchange or the market, but also, of labor.

Given that Adorno is reflecting on German Idealism, the language he uses may appear obscure in the context of our purposes here. For example, Adorno is particularly concerned with providing a materialist rereading of the universal forms of Kantian apperception. Adorno clearly believes such universality—or, more minimally, certain basic categories of bourgeois thought—is mediated by labor.²³ Thus Adorno writes, *contra* the ideal purity of Kantian apperception: “Rather, this universality is an expression of the social nature of labor... [L]abor only becomes labor as something for something else, something commensurable with other things, something that transcends the contingency of the individual subject” (Adorno 1993, 18). Yet while

Adorno's remarks are primarily concerned with the universality of forms of thought, they can be seen to apply more broadly to social forms such as value—the latter is not a mere natural content, but instead, as real abstraction, occurs through a “real conceptual operation,” even if unconscious. Adorno's broader point is that *all* universal social forms are neither the outcome of the transcendental subject nor of the isolated empirical subject, but rather of a certain social organization of labor. Here, Adorno affirmatively cites the young Marx's Hegelian thesis that labor is the constituting principle of “objective man,” and thereby signals his own commitment to this basic problematic in which social forms are the result of the “co-operative action of all of mankind” *qua* labor (Marx 1975, 333).

Adorno's appeal to the *Paris Manuscripts*, however, signals an ambiguity in his concept of labor. At times he appears to replicate the young Marx's transhistorical understanding of labor. Of course, Adorno famously contends that *all* labor effects a mastery of nature through conceptual practices that abstract from the particularity of natural phenomena. Thus Adorno may, perhaps, be justifiably faulted for at times employing a concept of labor without any specific historical mooring. Nonetheless, in his Hegel studies, Adorno's discussion seems to more often focus on the historically determinate notion of labor under capitalism. Some evidence for this specificity of labor is found when he writes, “The principle of the equivalence of social labor makes society in its modern bourgeois sense both something abstract and the most real thing of all” (Adorno 1993, 20)—here, Adorno is foremost concerned with labor in *bourgeois* society. And more evidence of a historically specific concept of labor is found in the following passage, where Adorno likewise refers to a modern global economy: “A world integrated through ‘production,’ through the exchange relationship, depends in all its moments on the social conditions of its production” (27). These quotations aren't meant to deny that some ambiguity

remains in Adorno's approach to labor. Nonetheless, here and elsewhere Adorno mostly focuses on labor under capitalism, as a determinate and historically-specific mode of social organization. Accordingly it is not labor *per se*, as a transhistorical category, that forms the central mediation of modern social life. Rather, it is the organization of such labor for the ends of capitalist value production that mediates society. Here Adorno approaches Postone, who views the specificity of capitalist social relations to result from labor's historically novel function as "socially mediating activity" (Postone 1993, 150). As in Postone, labor for Adorno seemingly becomes "a self-grounding social mediation," constitutive of a social totality (151).²⁴

Such general reflections do not directly address the constitution of value, and may appear orthogonal to the latter problem. Undeveloped and with significant lacunae, they certainly remain insufficient for a theory of labor in capitalism and leave unexplained the relationship between production and exchange. Nonetheless, I have canvassed Adorno's remarks on labor because they demonstrate that Adorno views labor as an essential moment of the capitalist totality. In contrast to Reichelt's contention cited above, Adorno does *not* believe that the economy is to be developed out of the exchange principle, or at least, not from exchange alone. Nor does Adorno maintain Pollock's identification of the market with capitalism. Instead, by returning to Marx's view that labor mediates all social forms, he signals that real abstractions, too, will in some way be an outcome of production in addition to exchange. Social labor is taken to be at least partially explanatory of the integration of society according to the domination of abstract categories such as value. To build out this explanation, and to describe in further detail the relationship between production and value, I shall now turn to Marx.

Labor: Marx

Whereas Adorno focuses on social labor, a consideration of abstract labor will better inform an examination of the relationship between production and value. In this section, I shall canvas the position that value is an immanent result of production *per se*, and doesn't require the mediation of exchange for its realization. At issue here is the status of abstract labor in production—given that abstract labor is the substance of value, the immediate presence of abstract labor in production could signal the immediate presence of value. Does labor only become abstract through exchange—as a surface reading of Adorno suggests—or is it immediately abstract in production? Marx's characterization of the dual character of the labor embodied in the commodity addresses this problem. Take, for example, the following formulation from the first edition of *Capital, Vol. 1*:

[T]he commodity does not contain two different sorts of labour; the *same* labour, however, is determined as different and as opposed to itself, depending on whether it is related to the *use-value* of the commodity as its product, or to the *commodity-value* as its mere objectified expression. (Marx 1966, 224, as translated in Postone 1993, 144)

At stake in this passage is the controversial distinction between these two types of labor, and the manner in which they are taken to respectively constitute the commodity. Here Marx does not mention exchange, and so his apparent claim is that abstract labor is in some way embodied in the labor process itself. However, it is not immediately clear how this could be the case, given that abstract labor is not a category of physiological labor. That is, no matter how thoroughly the valorization process shapes the labor process, abstract labor—as a “social determination”—remains distinct from concrete labor (Postone 1993, 145).²⁵ Thus, given that abstract labor will not refer to physical kinds of labor in production, more will need to be said about how it can be actual therein. (And it should be remembered that abstract labor is neither a mere ideal form nor mental generalization, but must be conceived of as “real.”)

Here I will follow Christopher Arthur, who similarly understands abstract labor as real within production, while neither ontological nor collapsible into concrete labor.²⁶ Arthur's strategy is to locate the reality of abstractness in *labor's relation to capital*. As Arthur writes, "The reason why labour is properly conceptualised as 'abstract' within the capital relation is that industrial capital treats all labours as identical because it has an equal interest in exploiting them regardless of their concrete specificity" (Arthur 2002, 42). That capital "treats" labors as identical does not mean that capital subjectively constructs such an abstraction. Rather, the abstraction is a structural feature of the capital-labor relation itself. Marx further expresses this view in the following passage from the *Grundrisse*: "[A]s the use value which confronts money posited as capital, labour is not this or another labour, but *labour pure and simple*, abstract labour; absolutely indifferent to its particular *specificity* [*Bestimmtheit*], but capable of all specificities" (Marx 1973, 296). Within the capital-labor relation, concrete labor is formally incidental to the goal of valorization. Instead, abstract labor is what ultimately constitutes the value produced in production. Thus the structural existence of abstract labor is seen in its valorizing *function*. The specific magnitude of value results from the abstract, homogenous labor that occurs in production itself (as measured against socially necessary labor-time). Capital "posits" concrete labor as abstract, while this character of abstractness remains a social characterization, irreducible to any physical reality. Yet the reality of this abstraction is verified by virtue of its functional role in the generation of value and surplus-value.

While it is not clear that Adorno had this specific account of mind, the latter seems at least compatible with his own analysis and critique of labor, while having the added advantage of more clearly explaining the genesis of abstraction in production. Given that concrete labor is not constitutive of value, abstract labor alone becomes the governing reference in the organization of

capitalist production. Thus the supremacy of abstract labor as a governing mediation of social life would represent, in Adornian terms, the rule of the universal at the expense of particularity—here, the particularity of concrete labor. Particularity is utterly superfluous to abstract calculations of value, and so is subordinated to the ends of valorization. As Riccardo Bellofiore has written, “living labour not only *counts* as abstract... but *is* abstract,” and is thus “form-determined” by abstraction (2009, 183). The labor process is thus progressively shaped and dominated by the valorization process, in what Marx has termed the real subsumption of labor under capital (Marx 1976b, 1034). Accordingly, production is a key realm in which agents carry out the imperative of value production and in which the subordination of particularity to universality is thereby materially enacted. Here I have touched on abstract domination, a theme to which I return below. For now it will suffice to note that Adorno’s central concern with the fate of particularity seems directly tied to this discussion of abstract labor. Here we see that abstract labor isn’t retroactively projected in exchange. Rather, it is a materially effective category that functions within production itself.

Totality and domination

After having thus advocated for an understanding of value as operative in production itself, a paradox emerges. Across his work, Marx seems to attribute the constitution of value alternatively to production and to exchange. In many passages he also seems to attribute its constitution *exclusively* to each of these spheres in turn.²⁷ I. I. Rubin articulates the paradox as follows: “On one hand, value and abstract labor must already exist in the process of exchange, yet on the other hand, Marx in several passages says that abstract labor presupposes the process of exchange” (Rubin 1973, 147). Arthur suggests that Marx never fully resolved this paradox (2009, 179). And

undoubtedly there is much ambiguity in his formulations. Nonetheless, I submit that Marx does give us the resources for a resolution, and also that this resolution may help to further reinforce Adorno's own theory. I shall sketch this resolution, before turning below to a consideration of its implications for our understanding of abstract domination.

Consider the following passage from *Capital, Vol. I*:

It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility. *This division of the product of labour into a useful thing and a thing possessing value appears in practice only when exchange has already acquired a sufficient extension and importance to allow useful things to be produced for the purpose of being exchanged, so that their character as values has already to be taken into consideration during production.* From this moment on, the labour of the individual producer acquires a twofold social character. (Marx 1976a, 166; my italics)

The first sentence of this passage might seem to posit exchange as the exclusive site of abstraction. Yet the subsequent sentence adds a further condition for abstraction: that the value-character of commodities be “taken into consideration during production.” In other words, the abstraction generated by exchange presupposes commodity production. Insofar as exchange is central to the realization of value, this exchange will be linked to a fully developed regime of capitalist production. Thus the passage doesn't only express a dual requirement of (1) exchange and (2) production. Rather, it further expresses the manner in which both spheres are overlapping, or co-constitutive. In resolving the above paradox, Rubin draws attention to two distinct notions of exchange that must be kept separate. The first conceives of exchange as a discreet phase of societal reproduction—here we can imagine pre-capitalist exchange, for example. The second, however, and that used in Chapter 1 of *Vol. I*, is a strictly capitalist notion of exchange, which Rubin characterizes as “a particular social form of the social process of reproduction” (Rubin 1973, 149). Accordingly, exchange is the social form through which capitalist society reproduces itself. As such it is inextricable from capitalist production. And just as exchange is indexed to commodity production, so commodity production in capitalism is

production for exchange. Hence it must be emphasized that the function of exchange is not merely to realize a value that remains implicit in production *qua* abstract labor. Instead, exchange impinges on production; exchange and production are co-constitutive spheres of a totality.

Rubin thus characterizes exchange as leaving an “imprint” on the production process (1973, 149). The production of commodities is production *for* exchange; the requirement of salability on the market determines the nature of production itself. Exchange mediates production (Arthur 2002, 33). More to our point, the necessity of exchange projects abstraction into production itself; exchange form-determines production. If exchange ratios are determined by the objectification of abstract labor, then so capital organizes the labor process accordingly. Production anticipatorily internalizes the form of abstract exchangeability (value) which its commodities must bear in exchange. Or, as Arthur articulates this point, “if production is value formed, that is, undertaken by self-positing capital, then living labour is treated as abstract *prior* to exchange precisely because it is treated as abstract *in* exchange” (46).

However, production thus conceived—as mediated by exchange—is not by itself sufficient for the realization of value. In other words, that production is form-determined by exchange does not mean that its labor is *immediately* abstract. It cannot be immediately abstract because abstract labor, as a social category, ultimately requires some mechanism of social verification for it to *count* as such. In other words, value must be realized, and that value can be devalued—for example, in overproduction crises, when commodities remain unsold—shows that abstract labor can likewise fail to be counted. In light of such considerations, Rubin endorses Marx’s characterization of social labor-time as a “latent” form which requires further verification (Marx 1904, 46; Rubin 1973, 150). This is not to say, however, that the labor process can be

fully abstracted from the valorization process. As I have discussed, concrete labor is understood through a lens of abstract labor in production, and so materially bears its mark. Thus all labor in capitalism is subordinated to valorization logics, and so any overcoming of capitalism will require not just the abolition of exchange, but also of labor. But to suppose that abstract labor is simply “there” or actual in production, prior to its verification in exchange, is to commit a category mistake. That abstract labor is a social determination means that it requires some social mechanism for its actualization. As Heinrich has neatly articulated it, “Abstract labor is a *relation of social validation (Geltungsverhältnis)* that is constituted in exchange” (2012, 50).²⁸ Hence for Marx, the mechanism of validation presupposes production but is completed in exchange, while production and exchange are equally integral moments of the capitalist totality. Just as exchange requires commodity production *for* exchange, so production requires exchange. Prior to exchange, value latently exists in the commodity, and it is on the basis of this value that exchange occurs according to non-arbitrary ratios of the abstract labor involved in production and determinations of socially necessary labor-time.

I submit that this understanding of the mutual necessity of production and exchange in the constitution of value resolves Rubin’s paradox. Moreover, it seems to provide a convincing account of the genesis, development, and realization of value not in one sphere of capitalism as opposed to another, but rather, through the totality itself. Though there may be some lasting ambiguities in Marx, this proposed resolution is perhaps the most plausible reconstruction on his behalf. I also submit, finally, that this sort of story is one which could further strengthen and inform Adorno’s own social theory. Let’s return to a passage partially quoted above: “[I]t is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become

identical, to become total” (Adorno 2007, 146, translation modified). Commentators have rightly pointed to such passages to indicate Adorno’s focus on exchange as the quintessential form of society. Exchange undoubtedly has a privileged role in Adorno’s thought, as Adorno takes its conceptual structure—subordination of particularity to universality—to be paradigmatic of domination *per se*, whether modern or pre-modern. Yet for Adorno’s account of exchange to be convincing, he must explain its universalizing character. He must explain, that is, why exchange “spreads” and “imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical.” Exchange alone, however, is insufficient for the universalization of such an obligation. Practices of exchange long predate capitalism, while only the development of capitalism fully universalized and standardized exchange according to the law of value. Accordingly it is a reference to capitalist *production*—through which capital pursues its immanent logic of expansionary self-valorization by way of the imperative to maximize profit through the production of surplus-value—that is missing in this formulation. Absent an account of how production and exchange mutually contribute to the spread of exchange-thinking, it is not clear why the latter could become as totalizing as Adorno claims that it is.

Not only would such an account strengthen Adorno’s social theory—more specifically, Adorno’s theory seems to *require* it, especially in its repeated deployment of the category of totality. For Adorno, totality is foremost a critical category, which designates an alienated social whole that falls entirely beyond the conscious control of individual agents, integrating all social and even psychic phenomena to its systematizing force. Understood foremost as *capitalist* totality, the latter thus “determines subjects as means of production and not as living purposes,” and “with the metamorphosis of labour-power into a commodity has permeated men through and through and objectified each of their impulses as formally commensurable variations of the

exchange relationship” (Adorno 1978, 229). For such an account to be convincing, one needs to explain how the universal comes to colonize all spheres of social and psychological life.

Assuming that exchange alone (or an appeal to a transhistorical concept of instrumental reason) is insufficient to explain this totalizing reach of domination, we also require an account of the dynamic interaction between exchange and other spheres. Yet by following Rubin’s suggestion that exchange “imprints” production, we find suggestive resources for such an account. The requirements of commensurability for capitalist exchange accordingly come to imprint themselves on all spheres of production, including, perhaps notoriously, that of the culture industry. The constitution of value thus cannot be limited to a sphere of exchange that would remain isolated from other spheres of social life. Instead valorization imperatives circulate through society more broadly. By appealing to Rubin’s “co-constitutive” view, Adorno’s characterization of the *entire social order* as a “negative totality”²⁹ thus becomes more credible.

With this concept of totality in mind we may now return to Adorno’s account of abstract domination. On a first pass, it matches Postone’s characterization of abstract domination as “the domination of people by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute,” and whose “initial determination” consists in the fact “that individuals are compelled to produce and exchange commodities in order to survive” (Postone 1993, 30, 159). Here, in the most general terms, it is the “laws of motion” of capitalism which, remaining beyond the conscious control of individuals, apply the indirect coercion constituting abstract domination. Given their dispossession from the means of production, individuals must labor, as means, for the ends of capital accumulation, which are regulated by the law of value and the general standards of socially-necessary labor time. On the other hand, given the “coercive law of competition” (Marx 1976a, 436), capitalists must seek to increase surplus value by maximizing productivity and

minimizing labor costs. Finally, the “law of capitalist accumulation,” as Marx puts it in a passage quoted by Adorno, “expresses the situation that the very nature of accumulation excludes every diminution in the degree of exploitation of labour, and every rise in the price of labour, which could seriously imperil the continual reproduction, on an ever larger scale, of capitalist production” (Marx 1967a, 771-72, quoted on Adorno 2007, 354). Given that labor-power is value-producing, and given the nature of competition, society coerces workers and capitalists alike, compelling them to follow not their own ends, but those determined by the laws of an inverted social whole.

Adorno’s repeated appeals to such laws suggest that he largely endorses them as accurate.³⁰ However, in accounting for abstract domination, his interest lies less in the nature or validity of such laws, than in the categorial form that they impose on the world. Here, it is the law of value which he takes as his starting point. Homologous to identity-thinking, this law subordinates particular to universal: the concrete labor expended in production is made to conform to reigning standards of socially necessary labor-time, and is thereby subordinated to its universal form as abstract labor. Yet this subordination affects not only the activity of concrete labor, as though the individual worker as such escapes from it. Instead, the individual itself is treated as though it is a bearer of labor-power *tout court*. As Marx writes, in strikingly Adornian language: “the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value, hence ... the whole negation of his natural existence is already implied... [H]e is therefore entirely determined by society” (Marx 1973, 247-48). Determination by society here refers to the latter’s subordination of the individual to the universal of value, which the individual approximates in his or her capacity as a “producer of exchange value.” The uniqueness of particulars is replaced by their standardization and concomitant fungibility as mere exemplars of this universal social

form, thus accomplishing “the reduction of men to agents and bearers of exchange value” (Adorno, 1969, 148-49).

This subordination registers a form of compulsion insofar as the individual is not free to act otherwise than as dictated by the system. Self-preservation in capitalist conditions requires individuals to conform to their designated roll as value-producing labor, as mere “appendages of the machine” (Adorno 1987, 117). Fabian Arzuaga has aptly described this compulsion as involving the “reduction of self-development to self-preservation” (2019, 822). Domination here consists in the reduction of the autonomous self-development of the individual to a mode of bare material survival, which in capitalism is attained by conforming to the requirements of value production. Though formally free, individuals nonetheless become the “involuntary executors” (Adorno 2007, 262) of the law of value, and thereby substantively unfree.

Adorno contends that abstract domination is not limited to the workplace but instead extends through the sphere of consumption and into all domains of psychic life. Individuals are no longer only “literally workers who have to adapt themselves to the nature of the machines they use, but far beyond that, workers who are compelled right down to their most intimate impulses to subordinate themselves to the mechanisms of society and to adopt specific social roles without reservation” (Adorno 1987, 117). In my discussion of Adorno’s concept of totality, I noted how the latter concept helps to make sense of the totalizing reach of compulsion. Here, by appealing again to totality, we see how compulsion need not be limited to a narrowly construed sphere of production, either: the preconditions for realizing value in exchange are generalized through society *qua* totality, so that all levels of social life contribute to this realization, whether directly, through the production of saleable cultural products, or indirectly, through the production and social reproduction of requisite forms of labor-power. Accordingly,

the individual's function as iterable bearer of labor-power is reproduced in the domains of consumption and leisure time. In the former domain, the individual serves as passive means to the realization of value on the market and must "make do with what the production line spews out" (Adorno 2006, 6). Leisure time, on other hand, is the mere "complement of alienated labour, ... intended only to restore the energy expended" (Adorno, 1978, 175). Freyenhagen has thus rightly written that for Adorno, "our lives—whether it involves play, love, doing philosophy, craftwork, gardening, religious devotion, or whatever else—get increasingly structured by the patterns of (capitalist) consumption and production" (2013, 63). However, my elaboration of abstract domination and its relation to value allows us to be more precise: our lives are not merely structured by the patterns of consumption and production *per se*, but are further structured by valorization imperatives which, at every level of society, compel individuals to make themselves more amenable to the direct or indirect realization of value.

This account of abstract domination is close to that of Postone. When the latter refers to "abstract social structures" as the source of domination, he intends not only the market and the class power evinced by private property; like Adorno, he also intends commodity-determined *labor*, which constructs society as "the quasi-independent, abstract, universal Other that stands opposed to the individuals and exerts an impersonal compulsion on them" (Postone 1993, 30, 159). Yet in distilling such domination as a basic logical relation between the individual and the universal *qua* value, and in fully theorizing how subordination to the latter limits the autonomy of the former, Adorno is able to more comprehensively theorize the full psychological dimensions of domination. Adorno's psychological account is in some sense an expansion of Marx's initial theorization of the unequal relation between labor and capital. Yet for this account to be convincing—for the notorious description of totalization to not appear completely far-

fetched—it requires the further account of the constitution of value in the social totality. In reconstructing the latter, I have thus shown that valorization does not simply follow *after* production, as though the constitution of value begins and ends during a discrete moment in exchange. Instead, the imperative to realize value in exchange form-determines production and society more generally, with the entire social totality transforming to facilitate this realization. What Adorno’s concept of totality explains—here moving beyond the account of Postone—is thus the reach of abstract domination across the whole of social and psychic life.

Conclusion

Recall Honneth’s contention that Adorno collapses the sphere of social action in favor of a theory of the personal domination of administrators. In this article I have argued instead that Adorno takes capitalist domination to be purveyed not by individuals, but rather by quasi-independent structures governed by impersonal laws. The primary form of this domination is the subordination of the individual to the universal category of value. Individuals are dominated insofar as they must subordinate their particular ends and autonomous projects to the heteronomous imperative of valorization that constitutes the totality, rendering themselves mere “agents and bearers of exchange value.” However, this article has furthered argued that if Adorno’s social theory is to be explanatory, it must account for the genesis of value, as the primary abstraction that dominates individuals. My wager was that an appeal to Marx adequately provides this account, otherwise missing in Adorno. Here I argued that the constitution of value can be limited neither to the realm of exchange nor that of production. Rather, following Rubin, I have argued that value must be conceived as the outcome of a dynamic interaction involving production and exchange, in which the latter form-determines the former. On this reading

exchange and production are co-constituting moments of a totality. By tracing the genesis and constitution of value to its source in this totality I sought to render Adorno's view of a totalizing "domination by abstractions" somewhat more intelligible.

If my reconstruction was convincing, then Adorno not only provides a social theory utterly different from Honneth's characterization; rather, he further traces the outlines of a theory of domination that is credible on explanatory grounds. Of course, Adorno himself was skeptical of explanatory theory *per se*. Rather than an orthodox theory of society, he advocated for what he called a dialectical and "speculative" one. Moreover, in his 1931 inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt, he decisively rejected the totalizing pretensions of philosophy, offering the interpretation of traces and ruins as its rightful domain instead (Adorno 1977). Any appraisal of Adorno's social thought must keep such methodological commitments in mind. However, methodological unorthodoxy need not entail social-theoretic irrelevance. Adorno's unorthodoxy was strategically motivated. He sought by modernist stylistic means to reveal forms of domination otherwise obscured by reified language, which he believed to be regressing to a mere "celebration of the commodity" and thereby unavailable for straightforward use (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, xiv). Adorno's philosophy is essentially critical; and it is critical of an alienated social system still reigning today. As evidenced by Honneth's critique, contemporary social philosophy has often neglected the abstract features of this system and its concomitant form of domination. It is for this reason that a return to Adorno's social theory is overdue.

Notes

¹ See Benhabib (1986) for an authoritative documentation of this shift.

² For a few notable exceptions, see Arzuaga (2019), Cook (2018), O'Kane (2018a, 2018b), Osborne (2020), and Prusik (2020).

³ Value critique represents a loose tradition of theorists who in the 1960s began to reconstruct a Marxian theory from the basic categories of Marx's work, as categories specific and essential to the capitalist totality. Value critique

overlaps in theoretical concern with the *Neue Marx Lektüre* and value-form theory, and anticipates what is today called Systematic Dialectic. There are important divergences between the different theorists involved in these projects. Rather than parse such divergences, however, I have found it more useful to draw from their collective resources. In what follows I appeal in particular to Moishe Postone, Christopher Arthur, and the early value theorist, Isaak Illich Rubin.

⁴ See Lukács (1971).

⁵ In a more recent essay, for example, Honneth argues that Adorno's "analysis of capitalism is therefore not an explanatory theory but the hermeneutic of a failed form of life" (2005, 50-51). Such attention to Adorno's unorthodox method is clearly necessary for a more adequate appraisal of his social theory. Nevertheless, in the later essay Honneth states that his criticisms of Adorno in *The Critique of Power* can still be defended. Accordingly, as Honneth still (ambivalently) maintains his earlier critique, the present article focuses on challenging the latter.

⁶ Honneth notes that Adorno occasionally interprets forms of thought as linked to commodity exchange, an interpretation which he attributes to the influence of Alfred Sohn-Rethel. Nonetheless, Honneth claims that such considerations always remain marginal to Adorno's philosophy of history. See Honneth (1991, 38).

⁷ Adorno's 1942 "Reflections on Class Theory" does seem to somewhat fit Honneth's emphasis on the agency of administrators in effecting domination. Yet from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* onward and through the remainder of his career, Adorno's focus clearly shifts to abstract structures of domination. See Adorno (2003).

⁸ On the important place of autonomy in Adorno's social philosophy see, for example, Cook (2018) and Shuster (2014).

⁹ Reichelt notes that the term actually originates with Simmel, even if Adorno's usage is influenced more directly by Sohn-Rethel (2007, 4). Adorno does, however, use the term "objective abstraction." See Adorno (1969, 148).

¹⁰ I discuss the distinction between abstract and concrete labor below.

¹¹ For another discussions of real abstraction, which likewise calls attention to its functioning "over the heads of men," see Adorno (1976, 79-80).

¹² Thus Adorno writes, for example, that "What makes commodities exchangeable is the unity of socially necessary abstract labour-time [*Arbeitszeit*]" (2018, 159).

¹³ For a characterization of this "co-constitutive view" as in fact a mainstream position within value-form theory, see Murray (2016).

¹⁴ See, for example, Lotz (2014, 15-25), which argues that Adorno's exclusive focus on exchange renders him unable to theorize what Lotz calls the "capitalist schema." Perhaps unexpectedly, Lotz here reiterates earlier criticisms of "ahistoricism" made by Honneth, Habermas and Benhabib, even if he nonetheless remains more attuned and sympathetic to the materialist and Marxian commitments of Adorno's thought.

¹⁵ Translation quoted in Reichelt (2007, 4).

¹⁶ Habermas similarly describes exchange as in some way instantiating identity thinking: "The abstraction of exchange is only the historical form in which identifying thought develops its world-historical influence and determines the forms of intercourse of capitalist society.... [Identifying-thought] does first gain its universal significance through the differentiation of the medium of exchange value" (Habermas 1984, 378).

¹⁷ See also: "Classical political economy demonstrated, as did Marx in his turn, that the true unit which stands behind money as the equivalent form is the average necessary amount of social labour time, which is modified, of course, in keeping with the specific social relationships governing the exchange. In this exchange in terms of average social labour time the specific forms of the object to be exchanged are necessarily disregarded; instead, they are reduced to a universal unit" (Adorno 2000, 31-32).

¹⁸ See, for example, the following passage from *Capital, Vol. 1*: "Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other *in exchange* as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it" (Marx 1976a, 166-67; emphasis added). The strong causal language in this passage seems to describe a process in which value is itself produced by the equating of products in exchange. This causal language does not, of course, preclude the existence of other causes (such as those related to production) that would contribute to the realization of value. Nonetheless, Marx is clearly articulating an exchange-specific process of real abstraction that takes place behind the backs of agents—just like the account of Adorno's described thus far.

¹⁹ See, for example, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Adorno and Horkheimer dedicated to Pollock (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). See also Adorno's 1941 article, "Spengler Today" (Adorno 1941).

²⁰ See, for example, Adorno's statement, from a 1964 lecture, which may be read as a rejection of Pollock's thesis of the supersession of the market. In the context of a discussion of the modifications undergone by "market society" due to phenomena such as monopolization and state intervention, Adorno says, "Because market society has been

modified so greatly, however, one must ask—and this is a very serious question that I wish by no means to anticipate dogmatically—whether, after this modification, one can really still speak of an exchange society. My own position, to make this absolutely clear, is that it still is one” (Adorno 2019, 27).

²¹ Postone contends that their adoption of Pollock’s state capitalism thesis ultimately led early Frankfurt School thinkers—accepting that the market had been superseded—to instead assert labor as the transhistorical cause of domination. In positing with Pollock a “noncontradictory social whole” (Postone 2004, 181), these thinkers were no longer able to diagnose either the immanent contradictions of capitalism or its specific form of domination, thus leading them to pessimistic political conclusions. While Postone focuses most of his criticisms on Horkheimer, they are also applicable to the Adorno of the 1940s, and especially to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, Postone neglects those later discussions of Adorno which in fact challenge these criticisms insofar as they consider domination not to be the transhistorical result of labor or instrumental reason, but rather as the historically specific result of the spread of exchange in modernity. Below, I consider Adorno’s account of abstract domination as it relates to labor, construing the latter, *contra* Postone’s reading, as historically specific. However, Adorno had even earlier criticized Pollock’s supposition of a noncontradictory social whole. For example, in a 1941 letter to Horkheimer, he challenged Pollock’s “undialectical assumption that a non-antagonistic economy is possible in an antagonistic society” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2004, 139, as translated in Gangl 2016, 28).

²² *Negative Dialectics* repeats some of the claims about labor found here, especially those in the lecture titled “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy.”

²³ Adorno isn’t arguing literally that Kant’s categories of the understanding derive from labor. Instead, I take him to be making a looser claim about forms of thought being *social* forms which are in some way dependent on the material and social organization of the world.

²⁴ Here I agree with J. M. Bernstein, who notes the proximity between Adorno’s and Postone’s interpretation of Marx (Bernstein 2001, 239n). Martin Jay also picks up on this proximity, although somewhat indirectly (Jay 1984, 267n).

²⁵ On this point, also see Arthur (2002, 45).

²⁶ Cf. Finelli (2007), which advocates an ontological reading of abstract labor.

²⁷ Above I have canvassed possible evidence for the claim that abstract labor is immanent to production. For evidence for the claim that value is only realized in exchange see, for example, the following passage from the *Grundrisse*: “On the basis of exchange values, labour is *posited* as general only through *exchange*.... Labour on the basis of exchange values presupposes, precisely, that neither the labour of the individual nor his product are *directly* general; that the product attains this form only by passing through an *objective mediation*, by means of a form of *money* distinct from itself” (Marx 1973, 171-72)

²⁸ While certain formulations of Heinrich may seem to commit him to the view that value is wholly constituted in exchange, he specifies instead that “Exchange does not produce value, but rather mediates this relation to the total labor of society” (2012, 55). Such a view is similar to that recently offered by Arzuaga (2019, 828), which likewise emphasizes the importance of exchange for the validation of social labor which is previously only “latent.” While the position offered in this article remains close to such views, it ultimately differs by emphasizing the manner in which exchange impinges on production, and by accordingly viewing the realization of value as resulting from exchange and production as *co-constitutive spheres of a totality*. As I briefly argue below, the appeal to totality here helps to further explain why domination becomes totalizing in society, rather than remaining limited to a specific economic sphere.

²⁹ On Adorno’s concept of negative totality, see O’Kane (2018a).

³⁰ See, for example, his discussion of the relationship between a “dialectical theory of society” and structural laws, for which he takes Marx’s laws of value, accumulation, and capitalist collapse as examples (1987, 112-13).

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