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Concepts: Negation, Mediation, and Criticism

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Introduction

The analysis of concepts and the process of concept-formation provides the possibility of uncovering the essence of the capitalist social relations that are masked by the world of appearances. Such analysis will show why fetishism is the mode of existence (mediation) of the capitalist relations of production. The fact that concepts assume an ideal objective existence is not something to be merely affirmed; such ideal objectivity requires explanation: why and under what conditions abstractions assume such an independent existence as is in the case of value and/or capital? Conceptual analysis, while it amounts to the ideal reconstruction of essence, will also facilitate the criticism of essence by showing its human content: essence, which is revealed in concepts, is the mode of existence of human relations (of production) that assume a historical-specific form. As Bonefeld, referring to Adorno, states,

Conceptual thinking is thus not external to reality in the sense that it requires validation by means of empirical corroboration... theory does not possess photographs of the empirical world. In contrast to traditional theory, critical theory aims to penetrate reality – “thought aims at the thing itself” (Adorno 1973: 205), (2009: 124).

The conceptuality of capitalist reality refers to its universal mode of being; reality is the reality of human activity: under capitalism, human activity is subsumed to capital, and organized toward the abstract and universal goal of production of value and surplus-value. The truth of this social reality cannot be penetrated and deciphered without the deployment of conceptual tools. Conceptual criticism of the capitalist social relations of production aims at revealing and criticizing the human content of this social reality and its conceptual constitution.

Conceptuality is not the explanation of one thing with reference to another; such circular explanation – say, explaining the supply demand and vice versa – amount to mere tautologies. It is not the discovery of natural laws either. For instance, the « law » that human needs food to subsist does not say anything about humans’ mode of subsistence. A human is not a natural being but a social entity. The human individual (consciousness) is a social relation; conceptuality is the revealing of the human content of the so-called laws of nature. «To conceptualise means to bring the thing to its concept» (Bonefeld, 2009: 126).

Conceptualization is a way of concretizing reality (Bonefeld, 2009: 126). Concepts are means of cognizing reality through activity within reality. They are means of acting in social reality and changing it – in contrast to empiricist understanding of concepts as abstractions reached through observation and induction.

I

Evald Ilyenkov states that « Contradiction as the *concrete unity of mutually exclusive opposites* is the real nucleus of dialectics, its central category » (2009: 85). Accordingly, dialectics is the means of critical grasp of contradictions not to resolve them within a third term but by showing the inner dynamics of the development of phenomena. Contradictions are grasped and criticized with the aid of true concepts: concept is the ideal reconstruction of inner contradictions of phenomena. For instance, with regard to the notion of value, Ricardo didn’t see value a being, a living concrete contradiction. He considered value only from the angle of its substance – that is labor — and didn’t conceive it as « substance-subject », whereas Marx’s theory of value (his conception of value) discloses the inner contradiction of value and use-value as an inner contradiction hidden in every commodity. As Marx states, « The simple form of value of a commodity is the simple form of appearance of the opposition between use-value and value which is contained within the commodity » (1976: 153).

« Essence must appear » (Hegel, 1991: 199). Development of concepts is the reconstruction of the self-movement of the “essence”

that “appears” necessarily. A concept designates « the ways of understanding meaning »; for Ilyenkov « ‘concept’ in dialectically interpreted logic is a synonym for ‘understanding the essence of the matter’, the essence of phenomena which are only denoted by a given term; it is by no means a synonym for the ‘meaning of the term’, which may be formally interpreted as the sum-total of ‘attributes’ of the phenomena to which the term is applied » (2012: 174).

Elsewhere, Ilyenkov states that « thinking in concepts aims at revealing the real unity of things, *their concrete connection or interaction*, rather than defining their abstract unity, dead ideality » (1982: 88). Thus, another aspect that comes before regarding concepts and its reconstruction of the contradictory essence of the real is its relation to the « concrete ». What is « concrete »? Concrete « is the unity of diverse aspects » (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: 206, quoted in Ilyenkov, 1982: 32). Concepts, revealing the essence of reality and of the object and as tools of cognitive activity thus facilitate accessing the essence of the real and acting upon that essence and reveal the necessary connections among aspects of diverse objectivity. Concrete knowledge, for Marx and in contradistinction to traditional formal logic, is the all-round, synthetic comprehension of the diversity in unity. The synthetic and therefore contradictory essence of the concept is therefore the consequence of its being a tool of concretely comprehending and therefore changing the real.

In his study of the process of concept formation, Lev Vygotsky identifies three different functional stages in thinking: syncretic thinking, thinking in « complexes », and conceptual thinking. Although complex generalizations look similar to concepts, they are qualitatively different. Complex generalizations are based on associating objective connections among objects: thinking in complexes is « connected and objective » (Vygotsky, 1987: 136). Yet, this form of objective connectedness is different from conceptual representation. Complexes function like family names; they fall short in explaining the essential-logical bonds that categorize a group of objects; complex thinking is phenomenal thinking: it is thinking determined by apparent objective connections among objects.

Conceptual generalizations, in contrast, reconstruct the logical and essential bonds between objects. Conceptual thinking is «emancipated thinking» because it goes beyond the apparent objective features of the to-be-categorized objects. A concept is not only the unification and generalization of similarities but the identification and abstraction of individual elements beyond the boundaries of experientially available concrete similarities between objects (Vygotsky, 1987: 163-5).

To put it differently, «Thinking ... is essentially the negation of things in their immediacy, of something immediately perceptible. Conceptualisation thus means to dissolve the immediate appearance of things in order to recognise the thing in its now pregnant immediacy – a mediated immediacy» (Bonefeld, 2008: 127).

A concept explains the plurality and difference in the general. A concept does not imply the elimination of contradictions, but as Ilyenkov puts it, «is based on the assumption that contradiction in the object itself cannot be and is never resolved in any other way than by the development of the reality fraught with this contradiction into another, higher and, more advanced reality» (1982: 267). A concept is the explanation of the genesis of plurality and difference from a particular root, just as, for example, the concept *cat* in evolutionary biology is not based on generalizing common features of the members of the species Cat, but is the reconstruction of the common genetic root that is traceable in features common to the members of the species together with those features that might have been lost completely.

Concepts come to be at the point of conjoining of thinking and speech. Identifying the cell of human consciousness while pertaining to Marx's method of analysis, Vygotsky states that thinking and speech have separate genetic roots. For concepts to appear, human language has to be constituted, and this is not possible unless thinking as outward activity of problem-solving, and speech as the emotional reaction to immediate stimuli, are conjoined in the form of word-meaning. Concepts require language to appear. However, there are two aspects to emphasize at this point.

First, concepts are supposed to be preceded by language; chronologically language, in the aforementioned sense, and thinking too, precede concepts. However, human language can be constituted once conceptual speech and linguistic thinking are constituted. Chronologically, concepts follow thinking and speech; logically, concepts precede human thinking.

Vygotsky introduces word-meaning as the unit of analysis of consciousness. As mentioned above, interestingly, word-meaning needs human language to appear the same time it is the condition of the appearance of human language. We can think of word-meaning pertaining to Marx's method of analysis of the capitalist relations of production. Marx begins with the analysis of commodity; yet this commodity is just the commodity in the simple exchange and not yet the commodity as the product of capital. Commodity in the former case is the condition of the capitalist relations of production, whereas in the latter case, it is the consequence of these relations. Commodity, in the latter case is commodity in its maturity: commodity that arrives in the concept of commodity.

As Marx writes in *Capital*

As the elementary form of bourgeois wealth, the *commodity* was our point of departure, the prerequisite for the emergence of capital. On the other hand, *commodities* appear now as the *product of capital*.

The circular nature of our argument corresponds to the *historical development* of capital. Capital is predicated on the *exchange of commodities, trade in commodities*, but it may be formed at various stages of production, common to all of which is the fact that capitalist production does not yet exist, or only exists sporadically. On the other hand, a highly developed commodity-exchange and the *form of the commodity* as the universally necessary social form of the product can only emerge as the *consequence of the capitalist mode of production* (1976: 949).

Pertaining to Aristotelian method, we can speak of simple commodity as commodity in its potential and of the latter as commodity-actual (keeping in mind the fact that potentiality is just a distinction of mind: all reality is actual). Similarly, word-meaning in its initial phase, that is, in the imaginary moment of the formation of human language, is the common characteristic of all human languages

and consciousness that makes abstraction possible. Moreover, it is still highly dependent on the immediate field of activity; it has a limited scope and is local in character. Whereas, under the capitalist relations of production, and with the formation of highly conceptual models and the abstract-conceptual structuring of language, it assumes a universal form, which is independent of the immediate field of production. It assumes an « ideal » objectivity, as Ilyenkov puts it. At this latter stage word-meaning is not just a device for abstraction but is a particular abstract universal tool of thinking and action, that is, it is a concept. Hence Vygotsky reformulates Faust's dictum as « *in the beginning* was the action ». This reformulation refers to the roots of concept-formation in human activity and points to its local and limited scope of application, on the one hand, while it signifies the ideal-objective character of word-meaning as concepts in modern society, on the other.

Secondly, the linguistic structure of concept-formation points toward the historicity of thinking and speech. Human activity in general and cognitive activity in particular assumes an abstract form. Abstraction is tool-making, first and foremost. Yet, as there is no production in general, as Marx states (1973: 85), there can be no abstraction in general. Production is always a determinate, specific production not due to the content of production, not because we always produce a specific thing, but because we produce in specific forms and with the use of tools appropriate to the form and mode of production. So is the case with abstraction; humans have always abstracted, at least to the extent that they have used human languages and have produced tools. But abstraction through concepts is of a definite form. Concepts apparently make knowing without the use of body and bodily activity possible.

It should be noted that historicity and historical determination do not signify a causal determination of human activity and consciousness by some extra-historical and supra-human logic. History, as Marx aptly puts, is the history of human activity, the activity of live human beings where the height of human activity is productive activity as humans' metabolic relation with social reality.

II

All human activity is tool-mediated and in this sense it is a delayed response to stimuli. The concept as the unity of thinking and being, or the unity of word and reality, is the symbolic tool that temporalizes human activity, meaning that human activity is not an immediate response to stimuli but is abstracted so that it becomes the stimulus of future activity (Vygotsky, 1994: 166). The self-movement of the concept expresses itself in the form of symbolic-conceptual human activity. Concept is linked to human activity; it is the organ of abstract human activity and therefore it is historically determined and specific. Concepts are formed within language but they come to their full maturity only under the capitalist relations of production. This is so due to the specific nature of capitalist production that is mediated through the abstract entity value. One example of such a mature concept is the notion of universal time as the universal constant; it is no earlier than the thirteenth century that the day is segmented into twenty four equal hours independent of latitude and season. Such abstraction could not be possible in the absence of the abstract idea of value.

Production prior to capitalist mode of production is the activity of isolated producers of commodities. These producers will incidentally encounter on the market as commodity-owners in order to exchange what they have produced. Pre-capitalist production is concrete; it is the production of a mere commodity as a useful thing which corresponds to some concrete need. Under the capitalist mode of production, which is the only truly social relations of production, all production is organized toward the abstract social goal of producing value, and more importantly, of surplus-value, which is measurable only by abstract time, that is, it is measurable only by the socially necessary time required to produce a commodity. Value is the mediation that « delays » production under the capitalist mode of production.

One can speculate that the emergence of value as a universal abstract social goal that organizes production in its entirety towards unstoppable self-valorization is the mode of existence of the social relations that facilitate conceptualization and conceptual thinking,

cognition, and activity in the form familiar to us. The apparent self-movement of concept is the reconstruction of the movement of capital. For Marx, capital is not a thing but is a process or a social relation, just as consciousness is a social relation. As Christopher Arthur (1998) puts it, « For Marx, capital as value in motion invests itself, in its phase as productive, in means of production *and* labour power. The latter does not, therefore, enter the process *alongside* ‘capital’ but *as capital* (so-called ‘variable’ capital) » (102).

As a process, capital develops through negative cycles. Capital is the negation of money, while money is the first form of appearance of capital. Money, in itself, is not capital. As mere money, it is a means of exchange for acquiring what we want. However, money is the necessary beginning point of the process of valorization of capital: $M - C - P - C' - M'$ (where « M » stands for money, « C » for commodity, « P » for production process, « C' » for commodity + surplus commodity, and « M' » for money + surplus money). At the end of the process M' as money appears not as the presupposition but as the result of the process of capitalist production; it becomes the necessary form of realization of capital as an independent entity. Money as the necessary form of realization of capital as an independent entity is the negation of money; it is negation of money itself for the capital to be realized in money-form. Capital is the unity in difference of money and the process of valorization of capital as a whole. Capital is the concept to which money has to come for capital to be realized as a social relation of production.

All social reality, which is the only reality as the social reality of appearances, is relational in essence. It is a relational reality of appearances in process. A thing is a mere thing only in the state of being a thing-in-itself. However, as a mere thing, it refers to some non-existent like Feuerbach's nature, of which Marx speaks mockingly in *The German Ideology*. Once the thing is made into a tool, then it acquires meaning; it becomes an abstract tool in being emancipated from its immediate surroundings and assumes universality — a limited universality that is bound to its applicability, which in turn is determined by the limits of human activity. Human activity is not boundless; so is the case with human thinking. Thinking

is always thinking the thinkable. As Marx states, one cannot think the unthinkable. This is not a tautological proposition. Rather, it signifies the fact that human thinking is bound to the limits of human activity. So is the case with human will and imagination. Once turned into a tool a thing is negated as a thing; its thingness is only a moment of its being a tool; although as a thing it precedes its being a tool. The thingness of the thing can only be affirmed in its being negated as a tool, which has meaning only with relation to human's social reality and in relation to other tools.

As mentioned above, all action is tool-mediated. The tool negates both itself and the object it is directed at. A concept is a historically-specific tool of such mediation and negation. Like the reconstruction of the contradictory essence of phenomena it reveals the unity in diversity: as the reconstruction of the common generic root of diverse phenomena, it is the negation of present. Yet, as the reconstruction of the essence that necessarily appears, it is the denial of the past, of the generic root, in its necessary form of existence.

III

The concept refers to non-conceptualities; therefore, it is also self-negating. The non-conceptual essence that the concept refers to is human activity and its mode. Human activity is the relational mode of existence of phenomena; it is the source of the meaningfulness of tool-objects. A chair, for instance, is devoid of any meaning outside the social environment of appearances that it is a part of. The very concept of value is a clear example of such social-relational yet ideal-objective reality. With the rise of specifically capitalist relations of production that aims at production of value, the commodity as a produced useful product turns into its opposite:

The body of the commodity, which serves as the equivalent [of value to be exchanged], always figures as the embodiment of abstract human labour, and is always the product of some specific useful and concrete labour. This concrete labour therefore becomes the expression of abstract human labour... The equivalent form therefore possesses a second peculiarity: in it, concrete labour becomes the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labour (Marx, 1976: 150).

The immediate process of production itself is an example of such relational and contradictory state: the capitalist process of production, according to Marx, is the unity of labour process and valorization process. As valorization process, the production process is the negation of the present by the past, as it is the negation of the live labour by past, dead labour, that is, value which is but accumulated dead labour. As labour process, it is the negation of value, since work, there assumes a concrete form of activity; it becomes the process of production of commodities as use-values. As Marx states, « Work is the eternal natural condition of human existence. The process of labour is nothing but work itself, viewed at the moment of its creative activity. Hence the universal features of the labour process are independent of every specific social development. The materials and means of labour, a proportion of which consists of the products of previous work, play their part in every labour process in every age and in all circumstances » (Marx, 1976: 998). Value, looked at from the labour process, is negated in work. Yet, all labour process under capitalism is a moment of valorization process; it is work only in the state of being negated. Similarly, valorization and value is bound to labour as the negation of value; value can only be affirmed in its state of being denied. In Marx's own words,

If we consider production just as a labour process, the worker consumes the means of production as the *mere means of subsistence of labour*. But production is also a process of *valorization*, and here the capitalist devours the labour-power of the worker, or appropriates his living labour as the life-blood of capitalism. Raw materials and the object of labour in general exist only to *absorb* the work of others, and the instrument of labour serves only as a conductor, an agency, for this *process of absorption*. By incorporating living labour-power into the material constituents of capital, the latter becomes an animated monster and it starts to act 'as if consumed by love'... This is why they [the capitalist, the economist, and the worker] are incapable of detaching their physical existence as mere elements in the labour process from the *social* characteristics amalgamated with it, which is what really make them *capital* (1976: 1007).

Let us concretize our discussion a bit further. Concepts mediate all cognitive *activity* (activity: knowing as acting and changing the world) just as value mediates productive activity under the capitalist mode of production. What are the specificities of conceptualization? Basically, concepts always entail an element of denial, of negating the phenomena the essence of which they are supposed to ideally reconstruct. On the one hand, by reconstructing the essence, concepts deny/negate the appearance in its diversity while at the same time they affirm such diversity. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the essence, that is the identity in diversity, is but the denial/negation of that unity in the form of appearance, as there is but one world and that is the social world of appearances.

The process of valorization is a conceptual process: turning to Adorno we can state that capitalism has a certain conceptuality. For Hegel the concept contains three moments: universality, particularity, and individuality (Arthur, 1998: 111). The universal, the particular, and the individual are simultaneous moments of the Concept. They are determinate internal differentiations of the concept or moments of its existence. When it comes to the process of valorization: Money-capital is to be conceived of as the universal moment; productive capital as the particular and commodity capital as the individual moment of industrial capital, namely concept-capital. The commodity, as the individual moment of capital is the most complex as it is the mediation through negation of which the valorization of C is actualized and capital appears as C', as valorized-value that is both identical to and different from C. Every individual commodity, like every single entity, is the universal, the particular and the individual: the individual is the concrete universal.

Marx's three forms of Capital (money-capital, commodity-capital, and productive-capital) are moments of Capital-concept (industrial capital). At each moment the earlier form is negated. At the end of the process money-capital as the presupposition appears as money + surplus-money, that is money-capital but this time as the result of the process.

The three moments of the Concept, to which Hegel appeals, follow a specific logic. Yet the logic of the absolute idea in Hegel does not

face a resistance, whereas, Marx's unfolding of the logic of Capital incorporates the resistance of the material conditions as a necessary aspect. This can be understood in a two-fold manner. Any circulation process can come to a halt, a break. Secondly in a larger extent the whole logic can come to a halt. This is due to the human content of the concept. The concept is capital. So be the case, the concept not only does negate but it is always also negated. It is contradictory in that it is a social process. As Adorno puts it the concept refers to non-conceptualities.

In contrast to Hegel's logic of absolute idea the logic of capital is transient, not only because it is a process that is continuously negated at each moment but because it refers to a historically transient form of the social relations of production.

In each era not only production, but also the means of production, the instruments of labour, and the conditions of production assume a specific form. The instrument of labour under capitalism assumes the form of capital, which, in its most essential form is money; and the worker is the wage-labourer, where wage-labour itself is the capitalist (monetary) form of work. Thus, states Marx,

Like the supporters of the monetary system the worker might well answer the question: What is capital? with the words: *Capital is money*. For while in the labour process capital is to be found physically in the form of raw materials, the instruments of labour, etc., in the circulation process it takes the form of money. In the same way, if an economist of antiquity had been asked: what is a worker? he would have had to answer, following the identical logic: A worker is a slave (because the slave was the worker in the labour process of antiquity) (1976: 995, note).

The essence is not related to appearance in a causal way; appearance is the mediation of the essence: it is the necessary *form of appearance* essence. As Gunn puts it, « The form of appearance of something is its mode of existence » (1987: 58). Thus dialectical conceptualization is the reconstruction of the mode of existence of something.

Conceptualization, therefore, assumes a critical character in a double sense: on the one hand, it criticizes the essence – the appearance of dualism dear to philosophies of Enlightenment; on the

other hand, it criticizes the historical conditions that yield such mystification. In this second sense, conceptualization becomes the criticism of fetishism: fetishism or mystification is not a cognitive fallacy; it does not imply that we are misled concerning reality; rather, « mystification - or “enchantment”- is the mode in which capitalist reality exists. So to say, capitalism exists as its own self-denial » (Gunn 1987: 59).

Conclusion

The concept is the depiction or reconstruction of self-denying social relations of production. Conceptualization is to show why existence assumes such a self-contradictory form, *i.e.*, to show the internal contradictory structure of capitalist relations of production, which in turn serves as its source of self-movement. Conceptualization, thus, reveals the contradictions, not simply in order to « resolve » them in a third mediating term such as « state » or « civil society » but to show how the contradiction, on the one hand, is seemingly « resolved » in those mediating terms but in forms of higher level contradictions and, on the other hand, to show the possibility of transcending this inner contradiction through negating/criticizing the mode of existence of the capitalist social relations of production.

Fetishism is the mode of apprehension of the contradictory essence of this social reality. In Marx's words, fetishism consists of the appearing of the relation between humans as an objective relation between things and the appearing of the relation between things as social relations between humans. In other words, fetishism is the appearing and also the reality of humans being determined and ruled by the laws of their own activity, where such laws appear as if they work objectively, independent of them and behind their backs. As Bonefeld puts it, « Marx's critique of political economy asks why human social reproduction manifests itself in the form of self-moving economic forces that assert themselves behind the backs of the acting subjects, indifferent and indeed hostile to their needs » (2014b: 21-2). Bonefeld further continues, « This, then, is the paradox of political economy: the economists, says Marx, ‘stagger about... within this

contradiction, completely unaware of it'. What they just described as a 'thing reappears as a social relation and a moment later, having been defined as a social relation, teases them once more as a thing'. » (2012b: 23) This is similar to the paradoxical existence of capital as a substance-subject: the moment the subjectivity of capital is admitted, it fails to be a subject as it becomes evident that it is a social relation; while as long as its subjectivity is not admitted, it appears as the Subject and not a social relation.

As Adorno states, « concepts are moments of the reality that requires their formation. All concepts refer to non-conceptualities » (1973: 11). In this regard, Bonfeld states that « The *no* is not external to but operates within that same society which it opposes » (2014a: 19). Thus, criticism is a negative movement; it aims at theoretical reconstruction of the inner contradictions of society in order to reveal the inner forces responsible for its movement: theoretical reconstruction is the tool to criticize these contradictions, negate them and replace them with « higher » forms of contradiction. The concept is the « No », it is the means and the medium of negation; it is the negation itself; the negative image of a negative reality. It is negativity in its mode of denial.

Conceptualization is the reduction of the social reality from its independent appearance into its human essence; it is the reconstruction of reality as human reality or as Adorno puts it, it is not to think about social reality but to think 'out' of it. *Reducio ad hominem* is to dissolve the objective appearance of the things to their essence as social relations, as relation between humans. Concepts are not instruments universally applicable; rather, they are part of the reality they attempt to criticize. This follows from the fact that thinking and reality are not radically different but are intertwined; or better that both are modes of existence of reality in its subjective and objective moments. So be the case, the reduction *ad hominem* will amount to conceptualizing the world in order to criticize it or conceptualization as criticism. To think out of the social world is to immanently criticize it; it is to show that although there is only one world and that it is the social world with all its encompassing

character, yet criticism is possible due to the internal contradictions of the very social world.

Thinking is essentially the negation of things in their appearance. Conceptualization thus means to subvert the immediate appearance of things in order to recognize them in their now pregnant immediacy – a mediated immediacy [*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*]. Thus, conceptualization does not mean ‘thinking’ *about* things. Rather, it means thinking *out of* things (Bonefeld, 2014b: 57).

To think out of things necessarily entails a negative element, meaning that it negates, as mentioned above, the appearance out of which thinking happens. This means that conceptualization is not a resolution of contradiction but the very contradiction because it happens *in* the world; it is thinking as acting-changing the appearing thing.

«The essence of capitalist society is capital itself, and capital is fundamentally just a name of a definite form of social relations. Nor does it mock the human subject by declaring it redundant» (Bonefeld, 2014b: 62). Capital is the « name » of an historically specific form of social relations; demystifying capital as a social relation, which reveals the logic of the genesis, constitution, and movement of capital as the concept: the concept of Capital affirms capital while negating it. It is a negation from within capital. Demystification of capital, that is the concept of capital, is capital’s twin; the concept always refers to the non-conceptual. Capitalism, thus, from the outset constitutes its own grave-digger. The working class is the concept-capital or as Marx puts it, capital in negative, or the negative side of capital (see *The Holy Family*). «Fundamentally, capital is ‘only a name’, and every individual capital is at the same time *the* capital» (Bonefeld. 2014b: 66). In this world of names and relations, of appearances and essences, reason assumes an irrational form and becomes the manifestation of the false world; it becomes the subjective mode of existence of the false reality. Therefore, as Marx states, reason has always existed but not necessarily in a reasonable form.

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