

The Meaning of ‘Abstract’ and ‘Concrete’ in Hegel and Marx

[Andy Blunden](#), June 2018

The classic text which defines the meaning of ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ for Marx and Hegel is the passage known as “[The Method of Political Economy](#)” in Marx’s *Grundrisse*. Here we learn that:

“The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception”

while ‘abstract’ refers to ‘general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc.’ ‘thin’ and ‘simple’ relations abstracted from the economic data with the aid of economic theories. This passage is a summary of Hegel’s Logic, and contrasts two phases of the development of concepts.

(1) “the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins. The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc.” – the movement from concrete to abstract. But (2) “the obviously the scientifically correct method” begins from the simple abstractions which were the outcome of the first path, and “the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought” – “a concentration of many determinations.”

The first point I want to draw attention to here is that the difference between ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ is *relative* not absolute. Concepts cannot be sorted into abstract on one side and concrete on the other. For example, the ‘population’ is taken to be “the real and the concrete” but “this proves false” as ‘population’ turns out to be an *abstraction* inasmuch as it *leaves out* classes, and the elements they are composed of.

Economics begins with observation, that is, the collection of economic data – Marx does not even mention this phase; he presupposes it. Each observation is an act of abstraction from a real living person or action as it is recorded with a mark on paper. ‘Population’ is arrived at by counting up all the marks indicating an individual person. But economic science proper utilises such abstractions as Gross National Product, Average Rate of Profit, the Gini Coefficient, the seasonally adjusted rate of underemployment, and so on, each of which is the result of elaborate calculations – “the concentration of many determinations,” and is in that sense concrete. They are nonetheless abstractions, torn from reality, simplified, but which, according to the theory guiding the institutions collecting the data, provide the necessary data for understanding the behaviour of the economy.

So the data from which economists begin, historically, is already a ‘concentration of many determinations’, i.e., concrete. They are also concrete in the sense of being relatively ‘close’ to reality, only two stages of abstraction away from it. The data mentioned above did not exist in Marx’s day, but are themselves the outcome of a century of development of economic theory. The GNP is not as such *explanatory*, but is a representation of reality, in line with the demands of existing economic theory and its categories. The process which moves from living human beings answering questionnaires to the determination of a country’s GNP, Gini Coefficient, etc., is, in Hegel’s terminology, the process of *Being* – the movement which begins from a series of isolated qualities and quantities and concludes with a series of measures. As is clear, this is a movement from concrete to abstract, and every observation (filling out a questionnaire) is itself already a process of abstraction. The subsequent averaging, totalling, weighting, etc., moves the data further and further from the original data collection, that is, becomes more and more abstract, but in concentrating multiple factors so as to better reflect that reality, produces more and more concrete information.

So Being is also a movement from abstract to concrete because every tick-box in a survey form indicates just one almost insignificant fact, whilst the total, such as GNP, represents something about the entire economy. But the Measures which are the outcome of Being are *abstract* from the standpoint of economic science, just a collection of facts abstracted from the flow of perception, each such fact, in itself, meaningless, and the measures are remote from the experiences of any citizen. The collection and calculation of economic data is a specific movement from abstract to concrete, which provides the abstractions from which science can begin its work.

The movement which ensues from here is the historical movement of economic theories, the struggle of political economists to understand the data and give advice to government and other actors in the economy which has a scientific basis. The production of a succession of economic systems and theories is seeking to understand and predict the relation between labour productivity, average wages, interest rates, GNP, GDP, average rate of profit on capital, etc., etc. This same process is also realised in the work of Karl Marx in his “Theories of Surplus Value.” The process of development of categories here has a distinct form: theories and their proponents criticise one another, and in particular they interrogate the basic propositions on which other theories are erected and the concepts they derive, and the result is the production of new categories. In the case of mainstream bourgeois economic science these include GNP, GDP, average return on capital, etc., and in the case of Marx they include organic composition of capital, surplus value, etc. In general, this process is *immanent critique* because theories contest with one another using the same basic concepts, i.e., data.

Although it is also a process of movement from abstract to concrete which is equally a movement from concrete to abstract, this process is not the same as the process of Being. Being is characterised by the production of quantitative/qualitative categories more and more remote from living experience, with the aim of finding aggregates which are more suitable for use in theories explaining experience, that is, by creating the starting point

for a reconstruction of experience in conceptual terms. The process which begins with the concrete data abstracted from experience and generates abstract categories, including laws, tendencies and relations, which may be explanatory is, in Hegel's terminology, the process of *Essence* – the movement which begins from a series of measures and concludes with a series of categories.

'Value' was the most abstract concept which political economic theory had produced in Marx's day, and remains so, as bourgeois economic theory took a turn towards positivism in the 1860s and eschewed the kind of theoretical critique by which Marx produced, in addition to 'value', abstractions such as 'surplus value' and 'rate of surplus value' and so on. Bourgeois economic science abandoned the concept of value and restricted the range of concepts it used to those which could in principle be subject to measurement. The application of mathematics and in particular calculus contributed to this tendency, which aimed to reproduce reality entirely within the domain of Being, that is, in terms of quantitative/qualitative measures, rejecting the use of true concepts. (By 'true concepts', I mean concepts which cannot in principle be calculated by quantitative calculation from the basic data, but play an essential conceptual and explanatory role. For example, the Behaviourists rejected 'consciousness' as a scientific concept.) This meant that the kind of data which would make it possible to measure data relevant to Marxist categories like value, surplus value and productive/unproductive labour were never collected.

After collection of data and formulation of theories, the third phase in the movement of economic categories ("the scientifically correct method") is that in which the abstract concepts which are the outcome of the history of political economy are brought together in immanent economic laws and tendencies so as to produce a coherent representation of how the economic data moves – a reconstruction of the whole, "not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations" – a *concrete* representation of reality which differs from the representation with which economics began which was a "a chaotic conception of the whole." The reconstructed whole is totality of thought-forms and therefore also an abstraction – a conceptually rich representation of reality. This third process is in Hegel's terminology the process of the *Notion*. The Notion differs from the whole from which science began because the reality represented in the measurements is the product of many different social and historical processes (remnants of feudal right, the influence of climate change, the interference of governments in the economy, etc.) while the whole which is reconstructed in economic theory is a representation only of the categories with which the reconstruction began – categories of the relevant theory of economics. The starting point was *rich* in content, but *poor* in conceptual form. The reconstructed whole is now *conceptually* rich, at the cost of some richness in *content*. Both are abstract in one sense and concrete in another.

The three processes arrive at three different kinds of abstraction from reality: (1) A complete quantitative description of reality, (2) The simple categories which form the essential content of reality, different for each type of economy, and (3) A conceptually rich and theoretically coherent approximation to reality. Each abstract representation of

the whole is concrete in the sense that it is the product of a protracted process of observation and reflection and is an adequate representation of that reality.

Let me make some general points.

These three processes do not happen in neatly separated temporal phases: as theories develop and are tested out in predicting economic events, the basic aggregates which are measured and provide the data are changed accordingly. And as theories prove more or less effective in reconstructing the movement of the economy conceptually, theories are changed and new categories replace old ones. All three process of categorical development are happening all the time.

Every concept found in any science is “the concentration of many abstractions,” and is therefore concrete. GNP is concrete relative to the multiple, relatively simple measures which go into its calculation, insofar as it produces a superior image of reality. Every concept found in any science is an abstraction, because it has been torn from reality and made an object of thought. All scientific concepts are therefore both abstract and concrete.

A concept is abstract insofar as it is removed from reality, and consequently all thought objects are abstractions. All generalisations are abstractions. A concept is concrete insofar as it represents reality, that is, has a sound basis in experience, is therefore connected by *multiple links to other concepts* and aspects of reality. A concept is abstract insofar as it *disregards* many aspects of reality in focusing on one, or because it *fails to effectively represent reality* in a meaningful way.

A concept may be described as ‘abstract’ if its connection with reality is poor as well as because its connection with reality is remote. It is in this sense that ‘population’ turns out to be an abstraction, not only because its reduces a rich totality to a single number, but also because it has weak explanatory power. ‘GNP’ has been criticised on the same basis – just a number, with little explanatory power. A concept which has weak explanatory power is an abstraction, as opposed to a concept which has great explanatory power because it is the result of a rigorous process of analysis, which can be said to be very concrete – a ‘concrete abstraction’. Marx’s concept of value is therefore in this sense a very concrete concept because it is the product of the entire history of political economy. But ‘value’ is also the most abstract of all the concepts of political economy since it is so far removed from experience that it escapes measurement altogether. But ‘price’, which appears to be very concrete, can prove to be abstract when the item fails to sell and realise its price. Is price a ‘realisation’ of value, or is value the expected, potential or ‘ideal’ price? This is where Marx parted company with contemporary and later positivist economic science.

Theory always deals with abstractions. Thought begins from one representation of reality in terms of one set of abstractions (visual images, numerical data, scientific concepts) and produces another representation of reality, a “reconstruction” of reality.

In moving, through analysis, from the data abstracted from the concrete process itself to the concrete abstractions which are to be the basis of a reconstruction of the whole in concepts, the writer must necessarily be guided by hypotheses, always with the aim of a successful reconstruction of the real whole in a coherent theory. Contrary to Hegel's claim that the Logic proceeds only by the step by step analysis of each concept in turn, the writer must inevitably make some false steps and follow leads which prove to be false only further down the track. Such false moves are, of course, eliminated from the final presentation of the result, which takes on the logical appearance of Hegel's Logic.

It turns out that the Marxist-Hegelian definition 'abstract' and 'concrete' is not entirely different from the everyday usage. For instance, in "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx twice uses the term "abstract thinking" in contrast to "sensuous activity." In "Private Property and Communism" Marx refers to "society" and "atheism" as abstractions. *All* thoughts are abstractions, but those abstractions which form only a tenuous basis for understanding reality, for practice, which are *mere* thoughts, can be described as 'abstractions' with the pejorative meaning of that term. In this same sense, Hegel says, in his essay "Who Thinks Abstractly?" that it is the uneducated person, not the educated person, who thinks abstractly – because the concepts they use have a more tenuous connection to reality, and are poorer in nuances, associations and theoretical grounding.

And not only thoughts can be characterised as 'abstract'. For example, Marx introduces the concept of 'abstract labour', labour which has been robbed of all quality and can be represented solely by its duration and intensity. This is the kind of labour which capitalism creates for exploitation in its factories.

See also: Ilyenkov's [Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's *Capital*](#).