

The subject, the worker, and the slave reification, capitalism, and the divestment of reason from freedom

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Tia Trafford** 

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Abstract

This article traces a line of thought through a reading of Lukács to suggest that the promise of Enlightenment modernity to emancipate thought from extrahuman authority is an impossibility because the problem of sovereignty returns in the form of the problem of freedom. The authority to make ourselves responsible, and act according to norms of our own making is the keystone feature of philosophical modernity. But this capacity to self-determine requires that the normative compels itself alone. This is a central problem for social pragmatism, which claims heir to Kant and Hegel's enlightenment. Lukács exacerbates this, pointing both to how capitalism enmeshes us within its sociomaterial systems *and* how this foregrounds worker's practical enactment within those systems. This casts doubt on the possibility of detangling norms from power required for autonomy. But rather than follow this line of thought, Lukács foregrounds the split subjectivity of the worker as the material limit of determination. Instead, in confrontation not with the figure of the worker but the slave as reified and naturalised category we might *disarticulate reason from freedom* in pursuit of the immanent disentangling of thought from the problems of sovereign authority that modernity promised.

Keywords

capitalism, sovereignty, norms, freedom, reason, Lukács, pragmatism, Kant, Hegel, worker, slave

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Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself [...] Human emancipation will only be complete when the real individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (forces propres) as social powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as political power.

—Karl Marx

In its universe there is formal equality for all men; the economic relations that directly determined the metabolic exchange between men and nature progressively disappear. Man becomes, in the true sense of the word, a social being. Society becomes the reality for man.

—György Lukács

[...] the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even [...] No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on).

—Jared Sexton

The problem of sovereignty for thought

I am interested in tracing a line of thought through social pragmatism via a (slightly heretical) reading of Lukács to suggest that the promise of Enlightenment modernity to emancipate thought from extrahuman authority is necessarily unfilled. I will call this the problem of sovereignty for thought because this project of emancipation attempts to deflate sovereignty by divesting the norms of thought from being determined by extrahuman authority or force. In the sense that I will be interested in it throughout, transcendent sovereignty concerns the authority to determine the norms to which a community is bound without reciprocity. The problem of modern thought then concerns how we are to construe the supposed deflation and dispersal of this right to command through the self-legislation of subjects themselves.

Since the bindingness of norms is dependent upon the authority of command, it follows that the authority to make ourselves responsible, and so act according to norms of our own making, is a keystone feature of philosophical modernity. Through emancipation from extrahuman authority, whether in the form of nature, King, or God, we foreground our own capacity to institute the norms that have authority over us.¹ The promise of Enlightenment modernity to emancipate thought from extrahuman authority is then supposedly realised in the collective capacity to determine the norms to which we are committed.

A transcendent sovereign must be understood to be self-instituting as a form of authority that constitutes its own authorisation (since otherwise sovereignty would be compromised) (Agamben 1998). Similarly, our capacity to self-determine requires that activity to not be affected by external cause or internal pathology. Without this condition,

normative authority collapses into power and we recreate the heteronomy of external determination. To deal with this, freedom, for the modern subject, is understood to be mutually co-constitutive with reason: rational constraint through self-legislation is the definition of freedom and freedom is a condition of our rational constraint. There is a reciprocal relationship between our collective activity and norms, with social norms required to be *responsive* to that activity and our activity required to be *responsible* to norms. In social pragmatism – which claims heir to Enlightenment thought, freedom then consists in taking ‘full rational responsibility’, as Robert Brandom puts it, in the sense that responsibility for the norms to which we are committed is squarely laid at our feet (Brandom 2021, 2).

A central problem for this pragmatic account of freedom concerns how it is actualised within specific social relations. As Ray Brassier suggests, modern humanity ‘frees itself from its subjection to nature (it achieves independence or autonomy), but in so doing generates culture as a second nature to which it is subjected (it becomes dependent on societal institutions, customs, and norms in a way that diminishes its freedom)’ (2019, 101). In being liberated from natural forces, we collectively produce a second nature that is ‘alien and arbitrary’, so to be a modern citizen is to be ‘subject to the authority of social forms by and with the consent of [our] own will’ (Menke 2013, 32). For Lukács, this encapsulates the thought that, in our freedom from subjection to sovereign mastery, we nonetheless produce reified social forms, and so our will is again faced with the problem of heteronomy, even if it is now a ‘slave[ry] of its own rule, of a rule it has made for itself’ (Menke 2013, 34).

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, I want to suggest that Lukács makes the stakes of the problem of sovereignty for thought clear. To do so, I begin by tracing the trajectory of this problem in recent attempts to maintain fidelity to philosophical modernity in the work of social pragmatism.² In brief, with freedom consisting in being constrained by self-legislated norms, we are required to be responsible to our normative commitments as a matter of *reasons* as opposed to *causes*. Charged with marking out a distinction between the two leads the Kantian to positing universally valid standards to which our reasons are constrained. In so doing, the risk is that the account collapses by both assuming freedom as arbitrary will *and* requiring the imposition of universal standards to hold it in check. The Hegelian response – and its social pragmatist form especially – attempts to stabilise the Kantian problem by situating freedom within sociohistorical forms of life. However, since freedom is still seen to coincide with the normative realm, if norms cannot be disentangled from their causal anchors (and causality is understood as domination) then normativity collapses into domination and freedom as self-determination dissolves completely. I then turn to Lukács, whose work I suggest provides the most succinct and substantive challenge to Enlightenment modernity’s emancipatory promise by articulating how capitalism engenders a situation in which our most immediate experience of the world, ourselves, and our own activity, is enmeshed with the genuinely impersonal form of social relation. This suggests the impossibility of attempts to extract reasons from causes required for the modern account of freedom to get off the ground.

Whilst Lukács might help us diagnose the problem, his answer seems to require a pragmatic account of the free action of reason – not as voluntaristic eruption, but as

reshaping the social world into a rational totality as and through the ‘realm of freedom’.³ But then we are led back to the problem of sovereignty: positing the free action of reason seems to require an irreducible metaphysical excess that transcends our practical activity whilst providing authority to decide on the legitimacy of the norms to which we are bound. Many interpretations of Lukács stop here, consigning him to a collective romanticism as historical failure. The second aim of this article, then, is to suggest an alternative reading that keeps in the foreground the practical elaboration and sedimentation of subject, object, and their distinction through which our experience of freedom becomes both necessary (for capitalism) and contingent (as historical process). Finding support in potential connections between this pragmatic basis for reification and theories of enmeshment bolsters this approach, making way for an account of the standpoint of the proletariat that avoids the pitfalls of the prelapsarian romanticism and promethean idealism to which Lukács is often consigned.

I finish the article by suggesting that, whilst I think Lukács provides perhaps the clearest attempt to avoid the problem of sovereignty for thought, by foregrounding the split subjectivity of the worker as revolutionary subject-object, Lukács stops short of where this thought might lead by requiring a material limit to domination. This limit cannot be guaranteed by metaphysical fiat or sovereign decision, but rather must itself be practically inscribed within specific sociohistorical contexts (since otherwise he would simply re-valorise transcendent sovereignty in the form of this limit). Drawing attention to an under-discussed passage in *History of Class Consciousness*, I elaborate how Lukács draws on the figure of the slave *in their negation* to buttress the worker’s freedom. This is an illegitimate manoeuvre that ultimately stipulates the impossibility of slavery for the worker a kind of practical transcendental that buttresses its own reification. Perhaps, then, we require confrontation not with the figure of the worker but the slave as reified and naturalised category. In this confrontation we might then *disarticulate reason from freedom altogether* in pursuit of the immanent disentangling of thought from the problems of sovereignty that Enlightenment modernity promised.

The instability of Kantian freedom

A guiding thought for philosophical modernity – and its reinterpretation in social pragmatic philosophy – is that we are required to be responsible to our normative commitments as a matter of *reasons* as opposed to *causes*. When we act according to rational norms, we are acting freely since our actions are determined by reason rather than by external force. We must be able to distinguish between norms over practices that are subject to reason and activities that are subject to causal force – even where these may be expressed in terms of norms – such as the compulsion to satiate hunger. Only regarding the former are we bound by rules implicit in practices and judgements, where these rules determine our responsibilities and commitments. We might think of norms as akin to practical rules that guide our practices by determining how we ought to act and believe on the basis of our being committed to them. Our being bound to these norms requires us to act in light of those commitments as a matter of rational force.

If freedom for the modern subject consists in constraint by self-legislated norms, this must be an *enabling* constraint. Binding ourselves to rules gives rise to new and expanded capacities, which recursively generate new forms of freedom: '[as Kant envisioned] self-constraint, undertaking commitments, and acknowledging responsibilities – that is freedom in his distinctive normative sense – is the form of what it enables' (Brandom in Testa 2003, 566). Freedom thus plays a substantive role for this account in the requirement that, whilst normativity involves responsibility to the norms to which we are bound, that responsibility also brings with it the capacity to freely alter those practices according to reason's demands. There is a reciprocal relationship between practice and norms, wherein our norms are required to be *responsive* to our practices, and our practices *responsible* to our norms.⁴ Freedom is actualised through this generative feedback loop between our responsibility to the norms to which we are bound, and the responsiveness of those norms to our will.

In Kant's view, following Rousseau, the unintended consequence of the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment was the metaphorical enslavement of human beings to their own ever-expanding passions. This would precipitate a "crisis" of the wayward and self-subverting rationality of the modern "culture" of passionate mastery' (Velkley 1989, 15). If it is human reason itself that is at root of self-alienation, then it is also reason that produces that which 'enslaves it as its self-distortion' (Velkley 2019, 736). Kant thus exacerbates Rousseau's anxiety regarding the enslavement of humanity to its own creations, arguing not just that the exercise of free reason can possibly undermine itself, but also that reason contains a 'tendency to self-subversion' that could destroy the possibility of freedom that reason requires (Velkley 1989, 12). Yet, Kant, in developing freedom as self-determination argues that it is in the free exercise of reason that we find our capacity both for 'self-alienation and self-rectification' (Velkley and Shell 2017, 209). Now freedom becomes both capacity and measurable ideal through we bind ourselves to rules or principles that constrain and direct us, whilst also holding one another to those principles.⁵

So, for Kant, because the will must be self-determining according to the demands of reason, we cannot bind ourselves to *any* will but rather we need some means of making sure that our will is purged from motivation by nature (both internal and external). Reasons have a binding authority insofar as they are independent from the immediate necessity of 'norm-less, state of nature relations of power alone' (Pippin 2000, 161). For Kant, marking out this distinction requires us bind ourselves to the universality of the Moral law.⁶ But here, the problem of sovereignty returns: how can we be both bound by law and self-instituting without external compulsion?

For example, the Moral Law does not direct practical action, instead it requires us to take responsibility for that action in each circumstance, which is to say that it makes autonomy possible. Nonetheless, it must be possible that in specific situations our actions can be judged against the Moral Law, and so our actions are subject to interpretation. In making judgements regarding what the law requires of us we therefore introduce a level of uncertainty since the law itself does not determine the conditions of its interpretation. Judging whether we have acted correctly in some situation requires appeal to the Moral Law. But the rule itself fails to specify how it should be applied, and since any

interpretation of the law fails to specify its own correctness, a regress is instituted. If we cannot disarticulate the demands of the Moral law from the force of power and inclination, then we would not be capable of knowing whether we are freely acting in accord with rational norms.

On these grounds, the Kantian concept of freedom appears unstable. If we are self-legislating and so set our norms which are then revisable at their discretion, then we do not appear to be constrained by necessarily valid standards. But, if we are subject to standards that we don't have the capacity to revise, then it looks as though we cannot govern our own actions. So, as Allen Wood (2007) remarks, autonomy looks like a deception because the will that gives the Moral Law is not our own, but an ideal rational will. Freedom, as Stefano Berdea summarises, is thus trapped between the 'arbitrary self-determination of the will and the heteronomy of an independently imposed constraint' (Berdea 2023, 133). My suspicion in what follows is that a version of this trap is an unavoidable barrier to thought's divestment from sovereignty insofar as thought is reliant on *freedom*.

Limits in Hegelian solutions

Let us briefly turn to the Hegelian solution to this issue found within recent social pragmatism. Unlike the self-constituting Kantian subject, Hegel pitches us already inside the mutuality of social relations – we generate norms through concrete sociohistorical activity. For Kant we are social *after the fact* of individual autonomy, with all the weight then leaning upon our ability to limit rational constraints such that they can accord with others (as encoded in the Moral Law). Hegel, on the social pragmatist interpretation at least, marks out freedom as necessarily collective in that our obligations to others are written-in to the process through which norms are instituted in the first place: 'normative statuses such as authority and responsibility are at base social statuses' (Brandom 2009, 66).

The question of freedom is thus interwoven with our mutuality and the way this poses limits on social activity:

Given that my own freedom from domination will affect and constrain other agents, limiting what they can do, I must thus take them into account. I have the authority or normative standing to demand that others respect my freedom *if and only if* I recognize their authority and standing to recognize mine (Suther 2024).

As such, the Hegelian response to the Kantian problem pursues sovereignty's rejection by requiring that whatever normative statuses are, they cannot appeal to anything other than that which is settled at the level of the community. Our actions involve commitment and responsibility, and freedom comes with the authority to make ourselves responsible for actions as a rational capacity that

[...] consists rather just in being in the space of reasons, in the sense that knowers and agents count as such insofar as they exercise their normative authority to bind themselves by norms,

undertake discursive commitments and responsibilities, and so make themselves liable to distinctive kinds of normative *assessment* (Brandom 2015, 36).

Since on this account ‘authority and responsibility are co-ordinate statuses’ (Brandom 2015, 36), these normative statuses are socially instituted by recognitive attitudes and practices, and so, as Brandom puts this,

Sorting out who should be counted as correct, whose claims and applications of concepts should be treated as authoritative, is a messy retail business of assessing the comparative authority of competing evidential and inferential claims. [...] That issue is adjudicated differently from different points of view, and although these are not all of equal worth, there is no bird’s-eye view above the fray of competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified, nor from which even necessary and sufficient conditions for such deserts can be formulated. The status of any such principles as probative is always itself at issue in the same way as the status of any particular factual claim (Brandom 1994, 601).

Since the actualisation of freedom is not determinable in advance, the specific form that our collective self-determination takes cannot pre-exist our social interactions. This is just because we cannot pre-empt the ends of the mutual activity of justification, and so we cannot also impose specific interests or desires on the process of constructing those practices that we jointly author. Our subjective capacity to actualise freedom is thus intertwined with the process of reciprocal generation since ‘we make the norms that make us what we are’ (Brandom 2019, 30). The instability within Kantian autonomy thus coheres through the stability of a successful community. Where Kant looked to the institutionalised discipline of our internal and external nature, Hegel has appeal only to the shape of our social structures as enabling us to realise reciprocity. We collectively *and freely* determine the norms to which we are bound through the ‘concrete real normative equality in interactions’ (Pippin 2000, 162).

However, if this is to provide us with an account of collective freedom and self-determination in the face of the unfreedoms of second nature, then we still require an account of genuinely rational norms. The Kantian problem of ensuring self-determination by appeal to universal law reappears in the pragmatic requirement to ensure that we can disentangle reasons from causes from within the messy business of actual social interaction. Brassier makes the point that, the Hegelian must then be

[...] compelled to discriminate those institutions, customs, or norms to which we are subjected and which have become mechanically compulsive for us, from those through which we are able to exercise our free conscious activity (Brassier 2019, 102).

Whilst supposedly appeased by appeal to sociality, the Kantian problem is potentially exacerbated because the only means we have to distinguish reason-constitutive from power-laden social practices can come from within those specific social practices (and the norms implicit within them). The pragmatist Hegel points to our mutuality, with our collective self-liberation from nature requiring mutuality and reciprocity since:

[...] there is just nothing left to ‘counting as a norm’ other than being taken to be one, effectively circulating as one in a society, acquiring the authority that is determinative for what happens, what trumps what, what cannot be publicly appealed to, etc. (Pippin 2000, 163).

Without appeal to metaphysics, this is the only guidance that we have to genuine rational self-determination. But now the capacity to act according to reason establishes that action as free, whilst freedom also results from mutual recognition. This makes freedom and reason conditional on a mutuality that is both assumed at base *and* achieved through rational acts themselves. Whilst mutuality is both defined through and determining of freedom and reason, it turns out that there must be a substantial metaphysics of mutuality to count as a free rational act in the first place.⁷

Lukács and the pragmatic determination of self-consciousness

It is in this context that I think Lukács helps to consolidate and sharpen the problems that we have just outlined facing the Kantian-Hegelian position found within social pragmatism. These problems are exacerbated if, following Marx, we think that within capitalist social structures, *contra* Hegel, ‘reasons’ themselves can subjugate us by actively impeding our rational capacities. For example, Lukács argues that the maturation of capitalism engenders social relations ‘mediated by the objective laws of the process of production in such a way that these “laws” necessarily become the forms in which human relations are directly manifested’ (1971, 177). So, Lukács is interested in how it could be possible for a social reality to be at once produced collectively through our practices, and also to appear to us as an ‘inverted world’. Often Lukács has been understood to argue that such reification forms a false or illusory veil over the real social relations generative of it.⁸ I do not think that this is an accurate reading of Lukács, but it is not my intent to maintain fidelity to conventional interpretations of Lukács. Instead, I intend to maintain fidelity (as I consider Lukács to have done) to Marx’s dictum that ‘all social life is essentially practical’ (Marx 1998, Thesis 8).

The guiding thought is that immediacy is always mediated and so experience (including experience of ourselves and our own actions) is interwoven with our practices, social relations, norms, institutions, and so on. This approach, as Nicole Pepperell suggests,

[...] seeks to understand how a genuinely impersonal form of social relation comes to be generated unintentionally in collective practice. By analysing the genesis of this social phenomenon, Marx does not seek to unveil it as an illusion. Instead, Marx seeks to reveal the social practices through which this phenomenon has become real and to understand how it continues to be reproduced as a ‘fantastic form’ of social reality [...] Marx attempts to grasp the phenomenon he calls the fetish character of the commodity as an unintended emergent property of the collective performance of a broad range of social practices that are directly oriented to other ends (Pepperell 2018, 37).

Since there is no immediately obvious mechanism through which our social practices generate social forms, the latter will *appear* objective and even necessary (Pepperell 2010, 105). This is a recursive process in which our normative concepts – such as freedom – are posited by the collective practices that create them, whilst then coming to ‘exert a determining force on activity going forward, expressing the objectivity of its now systemic character’ (Best 2024, 5).

The emergent patterns of social behaviour manifest as a tendency that becomes entrenched and naturalised (in the appearance of necessity) as social form where the social practices that are in turn sculpted by it become essential for our forms of life. Our social forms take on the *appearance* of objectivity because they are no longer responsive to our social practices, even whilst our social practices are made responsible to those forms through our mutual compulsion.⁹ Thus we find here a ‘reactive return of naturalness’ as Italo Testa writes, which is manifested in the entrenchment of social structures ‘in that normative structures start working as if they were natural ones, with a sort of *sui generis* causality, as estranged, reified second nature’ (Testa 2020, 160).

A fruitful way of thinking about this process of reification is in the recursive consolidation that can be found in the developmental-evolutionary theory of generative entrenchment. In our terms, the suggestion is that a social form often ‘has many other things depending on it because it has played a role in generating them’ (Wimsatt 2007, 134). As such, these often become the condition of possibility for other systems and structures, and so entrenched contingent practices take on the appearance of stability, longevity, and even necessity. Generative entrenchment provides a way of thinking about how structures both constrain and enable other activities and systems insofar as they are dependent upon underlying structures. Seemingly arbitrary actions can become profoundly necessary whenever they act as generative structural elements for other contingencies added later (Wimsatt 2007, 135). The more dependents that social structures have – where other things like institutions, laws, and technologies adapt to that structure – the more they become entrenched.

In this context we can see how reification poses a significant problem for the Hegelian requirement that we can extract reasons from causes through our mutuality. The latter leads us to understand reification as a form of domination by norms produced under socially-defective conditions. On that story, if norms imposed through capitalism exercise causal power, they must be heteronomous and so cannot be *genuinely* normative obligations. But disentangling norms from causes is particularly intractable where our social institutions become inaccessible and naturalised so exercising power over us in their concealment *as* social products. The immediate problem is that we may then be subject to pathological normative force beyond our control, which we nevertheless unwittingly consolidate by simply undertaking our (seemingly) normative commitments. Genuine normative processes would then come into conflict with norms that are produced under these non-ideal conditions, whilst those pathological norms would actively undermine any project of mutuality that could produce non-defective norms. Then, since the latter is supposed to provide the means to disentangle the former, the account leaves us bereft of the critical force it requires.

This problem ramifies. Consider Lukács' suggestion that our self-consciousness is 'determined by the capitalist order of which it is a product' (Patnaik 2023, 379). Put into the context of the Hegelian approach detailed above, since our social practices are the ground of the space of reasons, our relation to the world (via thinking) is built-in to our practices because our practices are reciprocally shaped by the normative systems they produce. Our self-consciousness, then, is a requirement for thought since the normative structures governing thought are produced through the transparent relationship between my 'self' and my 'practices'. But, if following Lukács we accept that capitalist social systems (forms, institutions, relations) also shape those practices, then they are internalised within our self-consciousness as well.

For Lukács, since our will is not only not transparent to us but mediated through concrete social forms, any attempt to extract reason from cause could not even get off the ground because we do not have unmediated access to the practices through which real social relations and actions are formed. The immediacy of appearances is a product of a specific configuration of relationships, which, for Lukács concerns the *objective* transforming of humans into things through capitalist processes of rationalisation, separation, and externalisation. Insofar as the social practices involved in this transformation give rise to social norms, these recursively constitute subject-object relationships *within* capitalist social form itself. This process of objective transformation then becomes a project of reification through the concrete determination of appearances.

In sum, for the social pragmatist, it does not then seem possible to distinguish between legitimate norms that we have accepted as binding from illegitimate norms that are imposed upon us to which we have acquiesced. But if norms cannot be disentangled from their causal anchors (and causality is understood as domination) then normativity collapses into domination and freedom as self-determination dissolves completely. Put another way, if freedom is supposed to coincide with the normative realm, but norms and power intertwine, then freedom is compromised unless we can ensure that this operation of disentanglement is successful. The account of freedom and reason arising from Enlightenment modernity is incapable of accounting for the distinction between 'what we take it we ought to do and what actually ought to be done (what would be genuinely rational to do)' (Suther 2020, 809). Since norms and freedom are supposed to coincide, it would then seem not only that we cannot discern when our will is free, but also whether our will is even ours to begin with.¹⁰

Norm-setting, reification, and enmeshment

Let us pause for a moment to take stock. It is widely known that Lukács developed an account of reification wherein a social relation takes on a thing-like form as a seemingly objective property. In distinction with the interpretation briefly sketched reification is more typically understood as a dominating structure that fails to be totalisable because of an ineradicable experience of subjectivity. Then, the inversion between subject and object that Lukács foregrounds is just where our subjective actions return to us in the form of objective and autonomous systems that are seemingly unresponsive to those practices that constitute them. As such, the positive Lukácsian story typically falls into two camps.¹¹

The first is a prelapsarian romanticism against our objectification.¹² This story understands Lukács to turn against the practical rationality of capitalism as a project of abstraction and quantification through which our subjective (qualitative) practices are transformed into objective (quantitative) abstract laws and institutions that come to dominate us. This is coupled with a romanticised vision of a pre-capitalist past to which we are presumably to return through the primacy of an unmediated concrete life (quality) over mediated abstraction (quantity). The second is a promethean idealism that privileges the self-determining power of the subject.¹³ This story understands Lukács to require, of the proletariat, a collective autonomy that can overcome its heteronomous dependence upon objective social structures by bending them to its will. I am thinking primarily of Adorno here, but Gillian Rose similarly suggests that this implies that ‘the subject will dominate the object’ (Rose 2009, 33).

So, either our collective subjectivity negates itself through an immersion in the qualitative concreteness of life (freedom as pure vitalism); or it dominates and negates the object in its activity (freedom as pure sovereignty). We are pushed toward a version of these accounts insofar as we accept that reification is a subjective production that comes to dominate us with laws that escape our control, and so the collective subject can assert its autonomy by either negating the objectivity it has produced (overcoming the heteronomy of reification) or annihilating itself in the face of that objectivity. Both are problematic from the point of view of ridding ourselves of sovereignty – one resurrecting the metaphysics we wanted to disabuse, and the other negating the object through the sovereignty of the subject.

In contrast, in the above, I have attempted to follow an alternative tradition that looks beyond the latent idealism that others find in Lukács to instead foreground practice ‘all the way down’.¹⁴ This suggests a reading that keeps in the foreground the practical elaboration and sedimentation of subject and object (and their distinction) through which our experience of freedom becomes both necessary (for capitalism) and contingent (as historical process). This can be understood as emerging through the crystallisation and naturalisation of the dynamic and messy business of social relations. Reification then operates across broader social systems with social practices producing objectified and relatively autonomous systems that operate according to laws seemingly independent of our underlying activity through their generative entrenchment. This seems to be a useful way of thinking about the duality that Lukács reads-in to reification, explaining how social forms both subjectively and objectively take on an ‘autonomy alien to man’:

There is both an objective and a subjective side to this phenomenon. *Objectively* a world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market). The laws governing these objects are indeed gradually discovered by man, but even so they confront him as invisible forces that generate their own power. The individual can use his knowledge of these laws to his own advantage, but he is not able to modify the process by his own activity. *Subjectively* - where the market economy has been fully developed - a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article (Lukács 1971, 87).

Importantly, the ‘non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society’ do not merely appear necessary (and unassailable), rather they *are* necessary insofar as they constitute a kind of sociomaterially produced (and so contingent) transcendental structure that gives shape to our experience and practices.

One way that we might cash out this thought whilst building on the social pragmatist account sketched above is to foreground Lukács’ use of *enmeshment* throughout *History of Class Consciousness*. This might lend weight to a characterisation of our embodied enmeshment as integral to the practical elaboration of the normative. We can think about enmeshment as the reciprocal and constitutive relationships that mutually give shape to our situated practices, as well as the dynamic space of affordances within which those practices give rise to social norms.¹⁵ For instance, Brandom’s Hegelian-inspired approach considers norms as emergent through feedback-governed processes of response across social fields. But, as detailed above, these processes are enmeshed within sociomaterial practices more generally. Foregrounding enmeshment makes it possible to build on the general idea that our social practices and interactions give rise to norms when the relevant activities reinforce certain patterns of behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable in social practices, by recursively acting upon those underlying patterns. But norms are then inextricable from the mechanisms of power operational across society. This, therefore, does justice to Lukács’ thought that our being enmeshed within relations of power is integral to epistemic access to both our own practices and to the norms that give them shape.¹⁶

To elaborate a little, the thought is that social norms arise through situated practices that form our intersubjective ‘worlds’ in reciprocal constitution with our environment, instantiating ‘the embodied and dynamic processes of interaction, coupling, and mutual shaping’, Danilo Manca (2022) writes. Norms are produced by adjustment and correcting mechanisms of feedback both internal to those activities and externally with material resources and institutional formations, where these mechanisms lead to the reinforcing of stabilities in those activities. Our sociomaterial practices occur within and reciprocally mould socionormative affordances (this is just a complex action-possibility space) that shape those same practices.¹⁷ Within this space, whilst our practices may be ‘locally opportunistic, open-ended, and flexible’ (Gregoromichelaki et al. 2020, 266), situational norms constrain possible action with a complex causal force that *has the feeling* of necessity.

Norms, therefore, become sedimented through our practices, interactions, and institutions, keeping our interactions coherent with each other through the convergence of our practices within a specific space of affordances. As such, we might think of norms not as rules, but as constituting ‘a way of orienting bodies in particular ways’ (Ahmed 2017, 43), or a direction of travel that acquires a momentum as a pattern that is reinforced. The normativity of practices is not expressed through regularities, nor by any rule-like norm to which they are always already supposed to conform. Rather, norms *arise from* more fundamental coordination and mechanisms of attunement with others, our environments, and the resources available to us. As norms become stable over time in this way, they are entrenched, structuring and generating new practices and norms that further establish them across multiple systems. As such, each interaction is a node at which local relations

and practices are interwoven with broader systems and structures. In other words, normative structures are generatively entrenched where this entrenchment is both constrictive and creative. The effect of these attunement mechanisms is to shape the landscape of practically available affordances in which we are all situated, engulfing and (re-)producing complex social spaces, and entrenching horizons of thought and practice.¹⁸

With this in hand, we can understand Lukács to articulate the proletariat's enmeshment within the machinery of capital as giving shape to the space of affordances, practices, and norms in which their lives are lived. The proletariat, for Lukács, is uniquely positioned within this social form because the commodification of labour-time means that the body of the worker is directly bound-up with the mechanics of capitalist valorisation and self-reproduction. As a result, the commodification of labour becomes woven into both the immediate reproduction of reified social forms and the possibility for a mediated consciousness of that process.

Importantly, telling this story does not seem to require us to build freedom into the constitution of norms either as initial condition or teleological requirement. Nor does it require that we determine the 'true' or non-defective norms through their supposed disarticulation from causation – that disarticulation is an impossibility since norms both sculpt the space of affordances and emerge through it – there is no social space that is (or could be) purged from social power. But also norms are not 'reducible' to power (just as in Brandom's story norms are not reducible to freedom), and power is not reducible to domination. Instead, we might think of reasoning as interwoven with, and apiece with, other dispositional activity all of which is shaped by, through, and *as* power.

Standpoint and the practical elaboration of the commodity

Let us turn to consider how this account of Lukács – as foregrounding enmeshment – might help to understand his standpoint theory. The latter has typically suggested that the worker is in an unmediated relation with capitalist machinery that provides epistemic access to that machinery. In this context, standpoint theory, very roughly, takes the proletariat to have privileged epistemic access to capitalist social forms because of their social positioning, or standpoint, in contrast with the capitalist.¹⁹ But, often standpoint theory then collapses into an empiricist account in which the proletariat has an unmediated experience of oppression that provides the ground for epistemic access to the processes through which that oppression is meted out. It is, moreover, through this experience that workers are supposedly able to assert their 'subjectivity, irreducibility and autonomy' (Patnaik 2023, 380). The claim is that workers have exclusive experience of their subjugation, with those experiences providing justification for knowledge that can be mobilised in their political overcoming (Mills 1988).

But this leads us back to one of the two dominant readings of Lukács discussed above – either requiring subjective immediacy or subjective domination. The temptation is then to take a reductive reading of Lukács of the kind offered by William Clare Roberts, that the 'only obstacle standing between the proletariat and complete emancipation [is] the absence of a correct ideology' (Roberts 2024). The interpretation would seem to be mitigated, however, not only by Lukács' sustained critique of empiricism, but more

broadly by his commitment to social holism. For example, if we accept social holism, then say for the sake of argument that proletarian experience provides privileged access to capitalist social relations. This would mean that *either* proletarian experience must stand outside of social mediation, in which case it is disconnected from the social mediation it supposedly makes possible; *or* that experience is not extricable from social practices and political contestation, in which case it cannot justify our knowledge any more than any other socially mediated category.

So, for Lukács (at least as I interpret him) there is no possibility for the direct justification of our beliefs by experience, nor is there an immediate experience of our own subjectivity that is later veiled, because immediacy is itself always already bound-up with social mediation. On this reading, Lukács' 'standpoint of the proletariat' cannot be articulated as a break within an illusory immediacy of capitalist social form – but rather specifies the way our embodied practices are reciprocally shaped through the mechanics and norms of capitalist valorisation.

On this approach, we could understand Lukács to articulate the proletariat's enmeshment within the machinery of capital as giving shape to their space of affordances, practices, and norms. The story of enmeshment given above does not require any unmediated perception that could *ground* our normative response – on the contrary, 'affordances are "processed" by actions in the environment' (Wilkinson and Chemero 2024, 15). The proletariat, for Lukács, is uniquely positioned within this environment simply because the commodification of labour-time means that the body of the worker is directly bound-up with the mechanics of capitalist valorisation and self-reproduction: 'the worker is forced to objectify his labour-power over against his total personality and to sell it as a commodity' (1971, 168). As a result, the commodification of labour becomes woven into both the immediate reproduction of reified social forms and the possibility for a mediated consciousness of that process.

This is due to the worker's enactment of a 'split between subjectivity and objectivity' that is induced through 'the compulsion to objectify himself as a commodity', and where this 'situation becomes one that can be made conscious' (Lukács 1971, 168). On the one hand labour as commodity is an external thing that can be objectified as a matter of its owner's will, whilst on the other, commodity owners are to treat one another as fellow subjects who cannot be engaged instrumentally. The seeming contradiction, Pepperell argues, requires a specific enactment of self in which our own labour power must be treated as our own property:

Sellers must, in other words, sunder themselves in two – with part of the self stepping forward to operate as an active agent – a commodity owner while another part of the self is positioned as the passively represented object that is the subject of the sale [...] enacted just as other commodities are: treated in collective practice as a passive material object that is offered up for exchange. Since this passive material object inhabits the owner's own body, the owner enacts themselves as a split subject – as an active consciousness and will, conjoined with a passive material body – as a ghost in the machine (2010, 249).

The distinction between subject and object is therefore a practical elaboration in which the world is experienced as objective structure that is resistant to our activities and our

subjectivity as passive in its face. So, for the proletariat, Lukács writes, ‘the barrier imposed by immediacy has become an inward barrier’ (1971, 164). The worker internalises the barrier between subject and object within themselves, experiencing ‘this barrier as a split within his/her self-consciousness’ (Patnaik 2023, 380).

Treating our labour power as a commodity that can be split-off within our subjectivity is simply a practical attitude that is mutually validated within social relations. Our split subjectivity is thus enacted in a context where freedom and equality are *experienced* as entrenched and unassailable boundaries buttressed against capitalism’s vitiating force. But both objectivity and subjectivity are produced through contingent social forms expressed in the practical norms of capitalist society. Rather than being written-in as a transcendent or normative criteria, the distinction between freedom and determination is a socially specific and practical enactment of subjectivity ‘that splits off social characteristics first discovered in the interactions of material objects, from characteristics associated with the uncoerced mutual recognition of subjects’ (Pepperell 2010, 250).

This splitting could (and often has been) read as requiring a subjective limit – a qualitative break – that cannot be surpassed and so is resistant to quantification. But this need not be the case, rather the worker’s enmeshment within the movement of commodities (as quantitative change to which they are submitted) is practically experienced as a qualitative shift: ‘the quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence’ (Lukács 1971, 166). Enmeshment is *felt* through the practical enactment of splitting of our embodied activity, with the potential for the worker to become aware of themselves as pure object (commodity) that is determined through capitalist social forms. The general idea is that the worker enacts a practical contradiction between subject and object – between their existence as a commodity and their enactment of labour as a free subject (Stahl 2023).

The worker enacts a practical contradiction between subject and object – between their existence as a commodity and their enactment of labour as a free subject. This ‘practically mediated contradiction’ is generated through the commitment to both freedom and its negation that is internal to capitalist social form (Stahl 2023, 339). The split in the subjectivity of the worker engendered through the commodity form of labour therefore engenders a specific self-encounter as the ‘*self-consciousness of the commodity*’ (Lukács 1971, 168). The result, according to Lukács is a ‘process by which a man’s achievement is split off from his total personality and becomes a commodity leads to a revolutionary consciousness’ (Lukács 1971, 171). Whilst this reads like a romanticised subject, this is a practical knowledge where ‘the worker knows himself as a commodity’, which is to say ‘*this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge*’ (Lukács 1971, 169), because it is produced through and structured by the elaboration of specific practical capacities from the start.

The return of sovereignty in the negation of the slave

Let us finish by considering whether Lukács is successful in avoiding the problem of sovereignty for thought. In particular, Lukács might be accused of having smuggled in a

stipulation of self-determination through the backdoor. The accusation seems apt, for example, when he states that though the worker's body is transformed into commodified labour power: 'while the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity dehumanises him and cripples and atrophies his 'soul' – as long as he does not consciously rebel against it – it remains true that precisely his humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities' (Lukács 1971, 172). This mention of 'soul' – together with the emphasis on the split between free subject and unfree labour – *appears* to rely on a form of freedom (as irreducible, stipulation, pre-existent, transcendental, or transhistorical essence) that we found problematic above.

But consider again the sociohistorical processes through which this transformation – and its seeming excess – are produced. The repetition and practical articulation of the distinction between self and commodity can neither be assumed nor written-in as a normative commitment to freedom in distinction from determination, the latter must simply emerge through those social practice of splitting proper to capitalism. For this splitting to be practically enacted, the portion of my 'self' open to determination must just be that part that is commodified as labour power, in distinction from that part that is understood to be free. So, the strict ontological break between subject and commodity is in fact a contingent social relation. We perform ourselves as free and equal as a historically contingent enactment that emerges through the complexity of practices involved in splitting ourselves into commodity owner and passive object.

The seeming ontological split between subject and commodity is here both dependent on and emergent through mutually validating (and so self-reinforcing) social practices. If explaining how freedom emerges cannot invoke an originary unity divided by capital (such as a human essence), then splitting must be a practice that happens *within* social relations that is concealed in the process of labour's commodification. Treating our labour power as a commodity that can be split-off within our subjectivity is simply a practical attitude that is mutually validated within social relations. The worker's split subjectivity is thus enacted in a context where freedom and equality are *experienced* as entrenched and unassailable boundaries buttressed against capitalism's vitiating force. But both objectivity and subjectivity are produced through contingent social forms expressed in the practical norms of capitalist society.

We might yet be suspicious as to how we can be certain that we are *practically enacting* our freedom within capitalist social forms. For the above account to be correct requires that 'both sides of the contradiction are to be located in the contingent social forms or practical norms of capitalist society' (Stahl 2023, 339). The problem is that Lukács now requires a remainder of freedom to be preserved even in the process through which the proletariat is objectified. It is this freedom that is supposed to both immanent to capitalism and a potential source of proletarian emancipation. But if our initial freedom to sell our labour requires us to freely enact our split subjectivity, then we might ask how freedom could emerge through those practices given that it appears to be their prerequisite.

In other words, freedom (as practice) would seem to be required for entry into the social coordination through which freedom (as normative commitment) is supposed to emerge. Freedom would need to be already inscribed within our social practices, acting as a kind of *practical* transcendental presupposition even whilst it is supposed only to

emerge normatively through those same practical attitudes. Freedom for Lukács is not an illusion in the sense that it is just an appearance – freedom as a practice of self-determination must be ‘real’ insofar as we practice this ‘splitting’. But then, if freedom is necessarily a normative commitment (within capitalist society), there must already exist *some sort of barrier* between freedom and determination for this practical enactment. Otherwise, there is always the possibility that we *could* be fully determined: there would be no gap between our selves and our commodities (and then capitalist social forms would (supposedly) have never been formed).

The pragmatic contradiction we find in Lukács’ ‘splitting’ thus echoes classical concerns with voluntary slavery. For instance, Rousseau suggests that the renunciation of liberty would require ‘absolute authority’ over one’s will, which is incompatible with the ‘unlimited obedience’ of enslavement (Rousseau 1993, S4). Kant similarly argues that, because the ‘I’ which is common to all humans is the source of willing, the ‘I’ cannot also willingly destroy itself. Since freedom, as Paul Guyer interprets the argument, ‘is the essence of what it is to be a human being [...] to be unfree contradicts that essence and is morally unacceptable for that reason’ (Guyer 2012, 94). For example, Kant writes that:

If he himself sacrifices his will to that of another; if he does this with respect to all his actions, he makes himself into a slave. A will that is subjected to that of another is imperfect and contradictory, for the human being has spontaneity (Kant 2011, 20:66).

The idea seems to be that since spontaneous choice (*willkür*) is essential for the ‘I’, the ‘I’ cannot thus will itself to be dissolved without contradiction. Since here spontaneity is asserted as characteristic of the human, the subjection of the will contradicts its essential character. The contradiction, as Patrick Frierson writes, is therefore between ‘positing that another human being has no will of its own by subjecting him to one’s will and the obvious fact that human beings, unlike animals, do have wills of their own’ (Frierson 2012, 66).

Lukács’ reformulation of the argument cannot help itself to the metaphysical implications involved in stipulating this ‘obvious fact’, but instead requires it be understood as the practical enactment of both freedom and domination, such that the latter does not determine the former in full. We can articulate the mechanism through which Lukács attempts to deal with this by drawing attention to the under-discussed passages in *History of Class Consciousness* that attempt to render a distinction between the figures of the worker and slave. In distinction with proletarian consciousness, the slave is so enmeshed within immediacy that their consciousness is wholly determined and so undivided:

Even when in antiquity a slave, an *instrumentum vocale*, becomes conscious of himself as a slave this is not self-knowledge in the sense we mean here: for he can only attain to knowledge of an object which happens ‘accidentally’ to be himself. Between a ‘thinking’ slave and an ‘unconscious’ slave there is no real distinction to be drawn in an objective social sense. No more than there is between the possibility of a slave’s becoming conscious of his own social situation and that of a ‘free’ man’s achieving an understanding of slavery. The rigid epistemological doubling of subject and object remains unaffected and hence the

perceiving subject fails to impinge upon the structure of the object despite his adequate understanding of it (Lukács 1971, 169).

Enslaved people can understand their own situation to be determined through violent coercion, whilst their unfreedom – as far as Lukács is concerned – is not caused by abstract structures of domination but rather than by concrete and personal relations. As such, the slave is supposedly unhindered by the immediacy of reification and rather can directly encounter their own domination but without thereby also bringing about a shift in practices and norms that alter the structure of that domination.

This slave can come to self-consciousness, but because they are not mediated by the objectivity of the commodity as social form, any awareness that the slave has of their own condition would fail to undermine the conditions of their own domination. As Stahl suggests, this is supposed to be the case even where ‘enslaved people are initially deceived by, say, a racist conceptual scheme that naturalizes the hierarchy to which they are subject, they can overcome this epistemic distortion without thereby changing their epistemic situation’ (Stahl 2023, 343). The slave may be able to articulate their own situation, but doing so provides no means through which knowing oneself as object could impinge on the structure of that object. There is no concomitant ‘objective structural change in the object of knowledge’ (Lukács 1971, 169), because the slave does not freely enter the production of the social relations within which they are dominated: ‘slavery is not constituted by the exercise of their free agency’ (Stahl 2023, 343). The norms to which the slave is bound are fully determined from without (the sovereignty of the master), and so recognition of their domination fails to undermine slavery since slavery is not dependent upon the enactment of free agency in its practice. In distinction, cognisant of how dominating social categories are at least in part the result of their own free choice, the worker’s commitment to self-determination leads to a self-understanding in which that same sense of agency is diminished in their subordination. This process of objectification cannot involve the complete negation of agency and rather is dependent upon the practical enactment of freedom.

However, I think that this leads us back to the problem identified above with approaches requiring that the realm of freedom and normative coincide. Whilst Lukács wants to avoid an inflated metaphysics of subjective freedom, the account requires a pragmatic guarantee that no matter how far the worker is dominated, it is impossible that they are enslaved. The guarantee is needed to ensure that the worker’s domination is produced through the capacity to split-off a portion of their subjectivity as commodifiable object (labour). The contradiction of voluntary slavery can be translated into this pragmatic context: our slavery (full domination) could only come about by exercising our capacity to split-off a portion of our subjectivity that would encompass our entire being; but in so doing we would nullify the very capacity to engage in splitting, so incurring a *practical* contradiction: we cannot freely transform our *entire* subjectivity into a commodity.

But just as above we asked of the social pragmatist how we can know when we are acting according rational norms rather than causes, we should ask of Lukács how we can know we are not fully dominated. The argument from contradiction is that we cannot be

slave since we cannot freely split-off the totality of our selves without undermining the act of splitting itself. But, without appeal to metaphysics or logic, the argument simply fails. Since the practical enactment of splitting is a temporal (and transformative) action, there is no reason to accept even the premises of the argument from contradiction. We are led back to the instability of the approaches discussed above. By requiring a guarantee that our freedom cannot be nullified, we produce an insuperable knot that cannot stave-off the indeterminacy of its own making. There remains the possibility that we are incorrect that the pragmatic conditions through which social norms are supposedly constituted are completely unresponsive to us, and so the worker does not, after all, have any practical involvement in norm-setting. This must be an impossibility for Lukács as much as for the pragmatist version of Kant-Hegel, since as Lukács suggests in the quote above, this would make the worker and slave coincide and so dissolve the possibility of free conscious activity altogether.

For all of Lukács' claims to provide a pragmatic and sociohistorically grounded project, his account of the slave is a reduction to slave capital – *instrumentum vocale* – as a speaking tool, whose primary purpose is thus to provide the negative prop against which to contrast the working class. The slave functions in Lukács' framework as a necessary remnant against which to measure freedom. The conversion of the worker into a speaking tool *must* be an impossibility within capitalist social forms, which are supposed to have given way instead to impersonal and abstract structures of domination that are socially mediated and produced. Without limit, Lukács tells us that the process of domination that produces the worker would instead produce the slave. But, just as the slave is incompatible with the worker, so too must slavery supposed be the inversion of capitalism.²⁰ The worker coheres around and against a slavery that simply indexes a social form freed from all emancipatory potential – including the capacity for thought at all – as the totalisation of domination. Slavery must function as the negative foil and condition of universal domination through which the freedom of the worker is guaranteed.

If it is not in the valorisation of subjective freedom that workers come to articulate their enmeshment within the machinery of capitalism, but rather insofar as they experience themselves as object, then Lukács' argument from contradiction begins to dissipate into an article of faith. Freedom, that is, looks as if it is simply written-in as a kind of stopper to our domination, which takes the form of an incontrovertible distinction between worker and slave. What Lukács requires of the slave is simply a negative counterpart to the worker: that the worker *just is* not the sort of being that could be enslaved. This functional negation of the slave is therefore a necessary non-optional counterpart to the non-optional commitment to freedom that can be experienced through it. But this must involve the *practical* negation of slavery (rather than logical or metaphysical). That is to say, our social commitment to freedom (even insofar as it is bound-together with our determination) is emergent as a practical capacity within capitalist social forms only insofar as the negation of slavery is also iterated in practice.²¹ We cannot help ourselves to a negated slavery unless that negation is also repeated within our practices, and so the distinction between the worker and the slave must be (re)constituted in every seemingly free act.

To clarify: the suggestion is not that freedom for the worker as (collective) self-determination is an illusion requiring replacement with a truer or more realistic account of

freedom; rather, it is to say that freedom as self-determination is a practical enactment, the commitment to which can be guaranteed only through an illegitimate distinction between worker and slave that buttresses its own reification.²²

If I am correct in thinking that Lukács does not understand freedom as the subsumption of the object by the subject, this is because the subject who becomes externalised (commodified) into the object (as reified social laws) then rebounds within the object (as commodified portion of the worker's life) and thereby finds the material limit to domination (as the not-slave).²³ Then, the otherness of the object-as-subject (rather than being the supposedly passive receptacle of subjective annexation) is the limit of reification and the driving force of subjective emancipation. It is in our becoming-object that we find this material limit in our own subjectivity. But in stipulating this material limit, and so looking to the figure of the worker to articulate emancipatory norms and practice, Lukács simply requires the impossibility of slavery for the worker, and the impossibility of thinking for the slave. In this respect, Lukács will resurrect the problems of sovereignty for thought, and we will ultimately sustain reified forms of life in the stipulation and practical enactment of these material limits in the not-slave. In doing so, we risk re-posing the worker-as-subject as an irreducible excess in the practical transcendental and so invigorate domination in its resistance.

Reason without freedom

I have suggested in the above that sovereignty, in its dispersal, reappears in the normative commitment to freedom, trapping us in an impossible drive away from heteronomy, objectification, and dependence that simultaneously valorises an irreducible excess. Insofar as we track the possibilities opened-up by this line of thought through Lukács' practical elaboration of freedom, we are returned to the problem of sovereignty by the stipulation of the impossibility of slavery for the worker.

Importantly, however, it is not in an experience of their 'subject-ness' (contra standpoint theory) that Lukács' worker comes to know their subjection, but rather through their enmeshment within and as object – blending with overwhelming forces that determine them (Sexton 2019, 30). Lukács does not carry this thought through, not because of any latent romanticism but because of this repetition and elision of the role of the slave. This repetition must be enacted in practice as material limit such that the worker is 'not-slave', and so becomes a kind of practical transcendental that buttresses its own reification. This is, perhaps, most evident in the naturalisation of the category of slavery as a 'speaking tool' incapable of thinking altogether.

Must slavery not then continue, and does the enactment of pragmatic contradiction not in fact further entrench slavery in its guarantee of the worker's freedom? That is, if workers practically enact a form of freedom that can be guaranteed only in the slave's negation, then marking out self-determination for the worker would seem to require that some people are totally determined from without. But, if this is the case, then the practice of freedom as a real form of life for the worker requires the continuation of sovereign authority *over* those people understood to be incapable of self-determination *at all*.²⁴

What if we did not require the slave to rescue the workers freedom (in their negation) but rather consider the slave as that figure who is not *completely* determined but indexes the unexceptionalness of determination? That is to say, norm-setting, as described above, is bound-up with power without exception?²⁵ If it is, moreover, the experience of enmeshed determination that makes thinking possible, perhaps it is with the figure of the slave rather than the worker that thinking might be more adequately thought. Then, rather than accept this naturalised category of the slave as ‘speaking tool’ against which to prop up the freedom of the worker, perhaps it is in confrontation with the figure of the slave, rather than the worker, that we might disarticulate *reason from freedom* in pursuit of the immanent disentangling of thought from the problems of sovereign authority that Enlightenment modernity had promised.

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Notes

1. Classical accounts of sovereignty require that authority is both absolute and perpetual, and so where sovereignty is vested in a human (such as the King), Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) suggests that we should think of the King having two bodies, one human, one divine.
2. I am particularly interested in the claimed inheritance of Enlightenment modernity in social pragmatism primarily because Lukács articulates his own thought as a trajectory critical of Kantian and Hegelian philosophy (as bourgeois modes of thought) towards a kind of sociomaterial articulation of the practical enactment of subject and object.
3. The phrase is used throughout the work of both Marx and Brandom, though with distinct inflection.
4. See Brandom 2019.
5. Further analysis of the instability of Kantian freedom is in Trafford 2025.
6. By Moral Law I refer to Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ – the principle that we ought to act only according to rules that could hold universally.
7. Consider, for example, Hegel’s reliance on the incarnation of Spirit in the Prussian state; Habermas’ reliance on the political community of the state; Brandom on liberal communities of trust.
8. See Bueno 2024; Pepperell 2018 for an overview.
9. See Postone 1996.
10. See Capener 2023.
11. For discussion, see Bueno 2024.
12. For example, see Colletti 1979.
13. For example, see Adorno 2004.
14. For example, see Feenberg 2014; Honneth 1991, 2008; Stahl 2023.
15. More detail regarding this approach can be found in Trafford 2017.
16. For instance, Lukács talks of ‘labourers enmeshed in such a situation’ (1971, 168).
17. See Lo Presti (2020).
18. On engulfment, see da Silva 2007.

19. This was later developed in [Hartsock 1983](#); [Collins 1986](#).
20. Lukács, like Marx, is concerned with the slave of antiquity rather than the plantation, but see [Sorrentino 2019](#) for discussion of how this operates in the context of plantation slavery.
21. Thanks to a reviewer for prompting this.
22. Thanks to a reviewer for prompting this.
23. This echoes [Bueno's \(2024\)](#) analysis of Adorno's interpretation of Lukács.
24. This might follow the trajectory of argument made in Afro-pessimist approaches to the slave ([Wilderson 2008](#)).
25. See Garba, Unpublished.

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