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**Representational
Practices in
Eighteenth-Century London:
A Prolegomenon to
Historiography of
the Enlightenment**

Universiteit Utrecht
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Inaugural Address

Inaugural lecture delivered on January 8, 2009 on the occasion of accepting the Belle van Zuylen Chair

This research project, which draws attention to fragments—the events and representational practices—positioned in space, let me call it a space of representation, whose boundaries are open to trespassing and sailing through or around, is bracketed by two events. First, there is the Treaty of Utrecht signed on March 31, 1713. While due prominence should be given to the result of the peace negotiations between France and England, an equal amount of prominence should be given to Britain's territorial gain of Gibraltar and Minorca, heralded as securing Britain's Mediterranean trade, its accession of the territories in Hudson's Bay, Newfoundland, and the West Indies, and the thirty-year *asiento*, or contract, to supply an unlimited number of slaves and 500 tons of goods per year to the Spanish colonies, a privilege which the French Crown had enjoyed for the previous decade. Second, there is the account of a Swedish botanist Henry Smeathman's arrival at Bance Island, fifteen miles upstream from the mouth of the Sierra Leone River in 1773. Bance Island was a West African slave factory operated by six London merchants, who benefited from the recognition of market principles in the African Trade Act of 1750 that transferred the control of African affairs from English government monopolies to private traders. What fascinated the Swede was not the order and neatness of the colony or its trade in slaves, but the entertainment provided by the owners of the slave factory to make up for tropical discomfort. As David Hancock writes:

On his first full day on the island, the botanist and his companions, traders from all parts of America and Europe, played a game of golf. In Britain, golf courses could be found only in two places and, on the continent, they existed only in Holland. In Africa, therefore, a golf course was something of a rare species and, in his diary, Smeathman described what was surely the first course on the African continent, as if it

were a new creature omitted by his friend Linnaeus. Two holes, each the size of a man's head, were made in the ground, he recorded, about a quarter of a mile from each other. The balls were the size of tennis balls, and the clubs were made from rare Central American woods. [. . .] The sportsmen were dressed in white cotton shirts and trousers brought from India in the factory proprietors' ships. They were attended by African caddies, draped in loincloths of a tartan design made from wool that had been woven in one of the partners' industrial ventures, a wool factory near Glasgow."¹

A golf course next to a slave factory, British and American traders in Indian cotton, slaves in tartan, and a meal consisting of Irish beef and butter, Caribbean rum, Virginia tobacco—the elements of a global synthetic society created by and for the merchants and traders, who, as this example suggests, had accomplished the goal that Adam Smith talks about in *Wealth of Nations* (1776)—that is, the perfect normalcy of bourgeois mercantile society, as evidenced by its actions.

This perfect normalcy of bourgeois mercantile society is what I want to address in this project. I wish to draw attention to the representational practices, operating within and without different structures, such as in the daily press, in the theatre, trade manuals, pamphlets, playtexts, and in cultural institutions—the Society of the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers, and Commerce (1754), or the British Museum (1753), for example—through which new forms of personhood were normalized and put into discourse in eighteenth-century metropolitan London, for the benefit of a new mercantile economy. And to be more precise, this project centers on the mutations in three spatio-temporal fragments, 1707–13, 1715–31, and 1767–76, in order to point to the process of abstracting cultural and societal norms delimited by the representational practices and

operations of the emergent capitalism of the Industrial Revolution, and subject to its constraints of what can be enunciated about the self's contingent existence in print, in public, or on stage and, inevitably, in the archive.² While focusing on problem of "abstraction" and, for this matter, of "trade" as well as the national embodiment of these notions in England, I would like to re-open a philosophical discussion on the Enlightenment in the twenty-first century.

What prompted this project are the shifts and transformations in understanding what constitutes historical knowledge as well as how theoretical investigations inform how historians as well as cultural critics theorize and locate the axis of Enlightenment thought. This prolegomenon to historiography of the Enlightenment will touch upon these two salient points and, in the final part, argue that the abstractions of thought associated with philosophical reasoning in and about the Enlightenment devolve not from French, Dutch, or English thinkers as much as from a logic of exchange and the predominance of trade within it.

The current status of historical knowledge in the Euro-American academy can be delimited by two distinct positions. On the one hand, consider, for example, G. R. Elton's or Gertrude Himmelfarb's historical project of the pursuit of truth through the analysis of empirical data and of the cognitive values that solidify the notion of a shared history; Richard J. Evans's stress on the hypothetical, multi-perspectival pluralism of historical approaches moderated by the factual reliability of the traces left by the past; John Brewer's "incident analysis," which is related as a story with multiple viewpoints whose repercussions are followed through the social order and across successive periods of time; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob's suggestion that we can celebrate a democratic, multi-perspectival pluralism of historical approaches as long as we agree on

the strategies for determining what constitutes historical evidence—in other words, this democracy allows hitherto neglected groups to tell their stories, and these different histories come together in accepting shared rational and evidentiary rules of what is plausible, legible, or legitimate in Western historiography.³

On the other hand, consider Keith Jenkins's rejection of the supposed modernist ideals of detachment, objectivity, balance, and diachrony for an understanding of the past/history that is always fragmented, fabricated, self-referencing, and endlessly questioning certitude; Alun Munslow's argument, following the argument of Hyden White made some forty years ago in *The Tropics of Discourse*, that the epistemological choice is always prior to "doing history;" Sue Morgan's practice which can never inhabit the historical mainstream in any epistemological sense; Joan Scott's reformulation of historical thinking as a kind of *critique*; or Ewa Domanska's reflections on the relationship between history and art.⁴

Realism, empiricism, objectivism, and documentarism define the so-called foundationalist history: a "past [which had] a once material existence, now silenced, extant only as a sign and as a sign drawing to itself chains of conflicting interpretations that hover over its absent presence and compete for possession of the relics, seeking to inscribe traces of significance upon the bodies of the dead."⁵ The aporia of decision, the condition of possibility, the grammatological space of general writing, the event strike, the elaboration of "initial forgetting," differential specificity, a critique of the unitary authorial subject, tropology, and "incredulity toward metanarratives" define this so-called rhetorical history—history that is never present to us in anything but a discursive form.⁶

The contested nature of historical knowledge has chiefly been viewed in terms of epistemology: the use of the past as a way

of providing an event with a past, from which it must have derived; a conceptual framework positioned somewhere between the two extremes of science and fiction; and a structure that would unequivocally explain what happens to and with the outcome of research.

As Fredric Jameson once noted, “Always historicize!”⁷ It is the history glossed over by this expediency of providing an event with a past, however, that matters just as much—the arrangement of records (are there experiences of the past that cannot be captured by the methods of the discipline?), the structures of belonging shaping events (what is there in the present that really belongs to the past?), the rationalizations used to make the records visible and intelligible (is it possible that one historicizes insofar as one is disenchanted with the present?), the representational practices employed to secure this and not that form, and the history’s function in promoting Euro-American historical knowledge (what is marginalized in the process of establishing the visibility of the event reinforcing a dramatic break between past and present?). It is this mode of inquiry that helps address those “naturalized” or reified categories of thought that have served as the basis of knowledge. What is at stake is not the existence of the real, but—given that the real can be apprehended only through cultural and ideological categories—which version of the real predominates. What is at stake is the need to restore events to their presents and their condition of possibility to open up a different trajectory, otherwise made invisible or glossed over by the dominant (or contesting this dominance) philosophical and academic forms and practices.

What is at stake is how it is possible to think about the historical experience of a past, about the ways of housing that past (the archive), the process of writing of history, and about the presence or intelligibility of the past’s event?

As I have noted elsewhere, Michel de Certeau, Michel

Foucault, and Jacques Derrida introduced the theoretical bases for the examination of the relationship among “evidence,” the archive, and the philosophy of historiography.⁸ De Certeau defined the archive as a place produced by an identifiable group sharing a specifiable practice for organizing the materials from simulacra or scenarios. Foucault conceptualized the archive as the law of what can be said, the general system that describes the appearance of statements as unique events that have their own duration. Derrida saw the archive as a juridical place where “men and gods” command with authority and where social order is exercised through the interpretation of the law.

These strategies have loosened the foundations of archaeological investigations; however, there also needs to be a practice that will exhibit the very mediality of history—that is, the process of making visible as such the claims on the past and the present, which not only generates different questions, but also, and maybe more important, destabilizes, rather than relativizes, the notions of an historical event.

Despite the outcry from the different corners of the academy fearing the demise of the very foundation on which scientific knowledge is built and the defenses mounted to protect the event as a building block of a history, the event does not need defending as such. Rather, it needs to be thought in a different manner because the event will be different in a history marked by the concept of the end (temporality)—be it in the Leopold von Ranke/G.W.F. Hegel tradition, shaped by a scrupulous regard for the historicity, the integrity, and the actuality of the past in the desire to reconstruct that past as it essentially was, or in a Marxist or feminist, queer, post-colonial studies marked by a radical movement of thought toward a future liberated from the constraints of hegemonic or oppressive ideologies—and a history in which, as de Certeau and Foucault aver, it is recognized that events, which did happen, are always marginalized by a system of structures

of belonging that define what is worthy of being archived, how it is going to be archived, and where it is going to be archived in order to maintain a particular visibility of those “events.” If it is no longer positioned on a temporal continuum leading to the redemption of the captive meaning, the event, let me suggest, remains on a plateau (Gilles Deleuze); in the open and dynamic field of specifiable relationships (Foucault) and potentialities (Homi Bhabha; Pierre Bourdieu).

Locating it on the plateau (and not in a temporal series cutting through the thickness of a reality) reveals that the event is a designation of a relation pertaining to “rationally isolated series within which it serves to *mark* crossing points, conditions of possibility, and the limits of validity”(de Certeau);⁹ a formation possible because of a relation established among authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification (Foucault); and a construct linguistically linked to a privilege of being (Roland Barthes).

Shifting the discussion about the historical archive toward the perception of the archive as the general system of the formation and transformation of statements, as Foucault suggested, will reveal not only the stagings of power in and of the archive, but also what Derrida called the secrets of the archive: presence, the proper, the archon, the unconscious, translation, responsibility, the law, the gift, the title, the institution, inheritance, hospitality, the other.¹⁰ Such an enunciation is not determined by “the reality effect” (Barthes, Rancière), the *habitus* (Bourdieu), or the common-sense notion that takes “evidence” found in the data recorded in archives as witnesses to an “event.” Rather, an historiographical view of this archive explores the relationship between the event and its taking place, between the materiality of the event and the language used in archiving this relationship, between the historicity of the event and its current employment in archeo-empirical studies.

Conceiving of the archive as a practice enunciating the

formation and transformation of statements clarifies why when historical knowledge is articulated, it is always fragmentary rather than a game of connecting the dots or of constructing a montage of historical units or categories such as, for example, “the ‘period,’ the ‘century,’ etc., [. . .] the ‘mentality,’ the ‘social class,’ the ‘economic conjuncture,’ or the ‘family,’ the ‘city,’ the ‘region,’ the ‘people,’ the ‘nation,’ the ‘civilization,’ or even the ‘war,’ the ‘heresy,’ the ‘festival,’ the ‘plaque,’ the ‘book,’ etc., not to speak of notions such as ‘antiquity,’ the ‘ancien régime,’ the ‘Enlightenment.’”¹¹ The fragments, like the shards of a broken mirror, cut through the remnants of metaphysics that have inhabited the structures of thought since the Enlightenment: since Anne Robert Jacques Turgot’s project of presenting a universal history, grounded empirically in Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon’s natural history; Immanuel Kant’s moral progress in history shown in the simultaneous movement toward internalization of history in the form of the reflective teleological judgment and confrontation with historical sublime allowing one to focus on civil institutions and their laws, rather than on historical suffering; Ranke’s trustworthy reconstruction of the past with the emphasis on the essential that made the account historical (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*); and Hegel’s dialectical history and its emphasis on “determinate negation” as well as on the tension between the particular and the universal.¹²

If it is possible to fathom that the philosophy of historiography draws attention to the condition of possibility that opens up the field and the substance of history, then the function of a historian is to emphasize how these singular events or fragments are brought to one’s attention; how they are described; how they are made meaningful; how they become worthy of record or notice by the past and the present; what labor formal arguments, emplotment, and ideological paradigms perform to secure their archivable place; or what tensions are revealed

by disclosing the situatedness of the object and the subject in the time of the now (“Jetztzeit”; Benjamin). I contend that the event/fragment cannot be governed by pre-established rules and categories that archive or simulate its presence or materiality. The event/fragment liberates “the present moment from the power of the past by banishing the latter beyond the absolute boundary of the irrecoverable and placing it, as usable knowledge, in the service of the present.”¹³ It refuses to yield to that knowledge which attempts to arrest it within the structures and technologies producing historical knowledge. If defined by that knowledge, this event/fragment becomes an abstraction, shielded by a non-empirical montage of historical categories in service of epistemology.

This process of abstracting, should I say historical abstracting, is not questionable because it is abstract but because it is blind to that history and social processes which constitute production of knowledge for the benefit or self-preservation of the academic discipline or field.

And to be more precise, let me consider the intellectual history of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment. There are multiple ways of interpreting both the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, some long cultivated in academic circles, other of more recent provenance prompted by feminists, post-colonial, and ethnic studies. One formidable tradition of study oscillates between the discussion of the long and wide eighteenth century—thus, conventional historical narratives span the period between the rise of Descartes’ disciples in the 1670s and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815 or, alternatively, more recent scholarship is shaped by the narratives that account for the “other,” the global, the non-elite, non-western pasts and geographic locations debunking those political and epistemological models of Enlightenment and modernist Europe which universalized the Eurocentric historical experience to the rest

of the world.¹⁴ As Emmanuel Chikwudi Eze observes in *Race and Enlightenment*:

Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perception of the human race. The numerous writings on race by Hume, Kant, and Hegel played a strong role in articulating Europe's sense not only of its cultural but also *racial* superiority. In their writings, "reason" and "civilization" became almost synonymous with "white" people and northern Europe, while unreason and savagery were conveniently located among the non-whites, the "black", the "red", the "yellow", outside Europe.¹⁵

An examination of the temporal and spatial flaws and imperfections in the academic design for the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment runs parallel to the intellectual trajectory of seeing the Enlightenment as a series of debates, which started with Gotthold Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn, and Kant's response to the question: "What is Enlightenment?" This question haunts the Western academy and, as the proliferation of publications on the topic in the twentieth century unequivocally indicates, will do so for years to come.

A survey of the tendencies reflected in these works is, indeed, illuminating. Ernst Cassirer *The Philosophy of Enlightenment* (1932) emphasized the importance and unity of a small group of French *philosophes* and the secularizing nature of their work. His is an intellectual history divorced from social context focusing on an essentially homogeneous formative power that broke with the transcendental and systematic philosophy of the seventeenth century. The unity he perceived in Enlightenment thinking is based on its supposed preoccupation with reason, elaboration of historicity and teleology, descriptive natural science, its empiricism, tolerance, the

development of civil rights, and the beginnings of aesthetic theory. Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: an Interpretation* (1969) continued Cassirer's chronology of an Enlightenment defined in terms of great thinkers—Voltaire, Charles de Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, Jean D'Alembert, Jacques Rousseau, Lessing and Kant—whose search for freedom and progress was achieved by a critical use of reason to change the relationship between man and society. In *The Business of Enlightenment* (1979), Robert Darnton focused on the publication history of a work which exercised a seminal influence in the Enlightenment's rethinking of the world—the *Encyclopedie*. By seeing the book as a commodity and in terms of its editorial work, expression of labor relations, and marketing strategies, Darnton draws attention to the changes in the position of the *Encyclopedie*, from that of a publication outside the law to a publication in which high officials in Louis XIV's administration, sympathetic to reform, sought to be published.

Another tendency in scholarship positions the Enlightenment as an intellectual orientation inspired by English ideas and science, especially those of Locke and Newton. Unlike Cassirer, Gay, and Darnton, who located the Enlightenment primarily in France, Roy Porter's *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000) sets out to demonstrate the central role of Britain, as the true home of modernity.

Jonathan Israel, in his *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), rejects the French perspective as well as the British one pointing to the slow and mixed reception that Locke and Newton received outside Britain. He also rejects the view, expressed by scholars such as Henry May and John Pocock, that there was not one movement but a family of Enlightenments, which emerged each in different national contexts, on the ground that such a national history fails to address the common impulses and concerns that shaped what was, in his opinion, an

international phenomenon. The European Enlightenment was a single highly integrated intellectual and cultural movement which owed its radical origins to the writings of Baruch Spinoza in seventeenth-century Holland:

focusing on national contexts is assuredly the wrong approach to an essentially European phenomenon such as the Radical Enlightenment. The movement or current was an international network bent on far-reaching reform philosophically, socially, ethically, in matters of gender and sexuality, and also politically, drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources and traditions, albeit from the 1660s it evinced a high degree of intellectual cohesion, revolving in particular around Spinoza and Spinozism. Given the range of its sources and its widespread impact, as well as immense anti-radical reaction extending to every corner of Europe, the most essential prerequisite for a balanced view of its origins, development, structure, and reception is to adopt a very broad European view.¹⁶

Moving away from the French, British, or the Dutch intellectual traditions and their representatives, Jürgen Habermas viewed the Enlightenment as a process created by a number of social practices, including economics and culture. Here, the rise of the novel and the press, and the creation of spaces for their reading and discussion—in the family home, the salon, the coffee house, and through table societies—created a private, domestic, and audience-oriented subjectivity that used ‘reason’ in public. The emergence of what Habermas called a “public sphere” became the training ground for critical public reflection about politics, a process of public communication still used to gauge the process of democratization. Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) offered an

eighteenth century as constituted by the open and, crucially, in need of completion communicative network of a public made up of rationally debating private citizens. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean François Lyotard argued that the Enlightenment was a project based on the notions of a stable subject and a narrative of history. These led to myths about the progressive liberation of humankind and the growth and unity of knowledge. Michel Foucault's "What is Enlightenment" (1984) considered the Enlightenment as an event, "or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institutions, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations" that are very difficult to sum up in a word, the Enlightenment.¹⁷

Encouraged by postmodern intellectual tradition, some feminist and postcolonial critics have developed critiques of what they perceived to be the gender-bias and European-specificity of the Enlightenment. Sylvana Tomaselli's "The Enlightenment Debate on Women" (1985), for example, and Joan Wallach Scott's "French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man'" (1989) seek not only to put women back into their place in history by examining a forgotten tradition linking women not to nature but to culture and the process of historical development, an examination which questions the universalism of the Enlightenment subject made visible in a language of rights that excluded women's presence and sexual difference, and, at the same time, it located political and social relations within individual bodies.¹⁸

The intellectual history assessing the emergence and the development of the state, nation, and the individual, or culture, nationalism, and political structures in the eighteenth century shifted

with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. As *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) poignantly indicates, they found that instrumental rationality, championed by the Enlightenment, “understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought,” served the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and the battlefield as evidenced by the events of World War II.¹⁹ For them, Enlightenment’s “disenchantment of the world” meant the suppression of the universal categories. “From now on matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent power or hidden properties.”²⁰ The program of the Enlightenment, however, produced its own myth. It became totalitarian in its practice of exerting power over nature and human beings through manipulating the relationship between the subject and the object, between the dictator and other human beings. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that abstraction, the instrument of the Enlightenment, denies individual thought and paves the way for a deceived and manipulated collective, the “herd” (Hegel). Nothing is allowed to remain outside in this civil bourgeois world in which everything is the imitation of what already is replicated (the so-called “compliant reproduction”). Far from showing tolerance toward different ways of thinking and being liberated, this Enlightenment “is totalitarian as only a system can be.”²¹ Using Hegel’s concept of determinate negation, Horkheimer and Adorno argue for a positive rethinking of the Enlightenment in terms of dialectics. Determinate negation “does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script.”²² The Enlightenment as script offers a possibility of moving thought beyond mere perception, classification, and calculation toward a praxis capable of bringing to the fore not the rule of law, which ossifies progressive thought, but a hopeful idea that freedom in society is part of Enlightenment project.

The analytical tendencies in historical writing about the Enlightenment in the twentieth century is a prolegomenon to historiography of the Enlightenment grounded in the exploration of a series of events, operating within and without a space of representation formed for the benefit of the operations of the Industrial Revolution, through which new forms of personhood were put into discourse in eighteenth-century London. By this, I mean that the emergent capitalism of the Industrial Revolution in eighteenth-century London depended on the dissemination of categories, of subjects or subject-positions, and of experiences that could not be subsumed within the types available in existing (or past) economic structures hitherto controlled by the sovereign State. A new economic operation required a distinct emphasis on the ways in which power operated to form an everyday understanding of social and economic relations and to orchestrate the ways in which the people consented to and reproduced those relations of power—that is, the new economy required deliberate planning, which superseded inherited techniques and customary social relations. Further, the new mode of production at the time of the Industrial Revolution depended not only on the economic policy but also on proclaiming a new personality type—and to be more precise, on proclaiming the new conditions allowing individuals to express themselves, in their daily lives, as subjects in a new cultural, political, and economic environment.

My project is thus concerned not with the philosophical, radical nature, or different temporal or spatial geographies of the Enlightenment but with the historical specificity of the Industrial Revolution. It draws on the distinction between the spatial and the temporal aspects of the transformations of political and economic systems. It puts forth the need to study the Enlightenment through English trade. And finally, it depicts the Industrial Revolution as a series

of historical mutations within the mercantile culture. These mutations, shaping concrete realities, were turned into abstractions and, as abstract categories, emerged both in life and in the archive as though they were pure or universal concepts and equivalences.

This last sentence merits a further elaboration—thus, let me explore briefly the contested notion of abstraction, which itself is ambiguous and unstable. In the 1857 Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx introduces the concept of abstraction in the passage on the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete:

The seventeenth-century economists, for example, always took as their starting point the living organism, the population, the nation, the State, several States, etc., but analysis led them always in the end to the discovery of a few decisive abstract, general relations, such as division of labour, money, and value. When these separate factors were more or less clearly deduced and established, economic systems were evolved which from simple concepts, such as labour, division of labour, demand, exchange-value, advanced to categories like State, international exchange and world market. The latter is obviously the correct scientific method. The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination. The first procedure attenuates meaningful images to abstract definitions, the second leads from abstract definitions by way of reasoning to the reproduction of the concrete situation.²³

Moving beyond the discussion about Marx's break with an empiricist or

neopositivist usage of the terms “abstract” and “concrete,” it is accepted that the 1857 Introduction establishes a clear break with a generic, humanist, or anthropological concept of abstraction defined as a mask, fantasy, or a diversion regarding all political (the State) or religious (God) representations. In its stead, it introduces the notion of “real abstraction” viewed as a material force operative in the world shaping the relations of production and historically determining the mode of production. Thus, what used to be a fictitious image—a vision of abstraction depicted as a structure of illusion—underlying the ways of governing the subjects is now recognized as a social and historical phenomenon. More important, the shift is not from the abstract to the concrete, a form of a logical progression in the Hegelian sense, but it draws attention to a transformation of the system based on the State and Religion into a system based on Trade. As Andrew Fletcher noted in 1704, “trade is now become the golden ball, for which all the nations of the world are contending.”²⁴ This abstraction, associated with trade’s division of labor, money, and value, becomes thus historical and capable of articulating a society. It is not, as an earlier discussion of the twentieth-century approaches to the Enlightenment demonstrated, a mental generalization concerned with ideological, gender, racial or political preoccupations with the epistemological model of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment. This was made obvious by the British Union of 1707 wherein politics converged with economics; and religious and civil liberty was associated with freedom of trade.²⁵

The ontological character of abstraction, which is political, historical, and economic, is the focal point of this investigation. It argues for resingularizing the notion of abstraction by suggesting a shift from a generic, humanist, or anthropological concept of abstraction (a fantasy or a thought) toward a vision of abstraction which is real, in a sense of political, historical, and economic practices. It draws on the

tradition that grounds intellectual labor in operations of capitalism. Alfred Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology, and especially of philosophical epistemology, is the case in point. It starts with defining philosophical epistemology in terms of scientific knowledge undertaken with the aim of elaborating a coherent, all-embracing ideology to suit the production relations of bourgeois society, which culminated, for him, with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, "the classical manifestation of the bourgeois fetishism of intellectual labour."²⁶ In other words, knowledge lies at the intersection of formal elements of the social synthesis and the formal components of cognition. The key to unpacking this identity is, as Sohn-Rethel argues, the formal analysis of the commodity form. And to be more precise, "the formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour, which came into existence with it."²⁷

Following the ideas concerning abstraction expressed by Marx in the above-quoted passage from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Sohn-Rethel draws attention to that philosophical tradition which, since Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, was a product of the division between mental and manual labor by noting that abstraction was not the exclusive property of the mind, but arises in commodity exchange.²⁸ By so doing, he undertakes an exploration of abstract thought. This abstract thought is no longer however defined in terms of rationalism or empiricism. Neither is it defined in terms of social context, the material reality of cognition, or in "thinking and being embracing each other in the perfection of the bourgeois state."²⁹ Rather, Sohn-Rethel argues that abstract thought, whether found in Cartesian postulations of scientific laws or in the Kantian transcendental subject, is determined by the commodity exchange. Abstraction is not

in the individual mind, he argues, but is closely connected with human actions, a result of spatio-temporal activity. “It is the action of exchange, and the action alone, that is abstract,” asserts Sohn-Rethel.³⁰ In this schema, both phenomenological and epistemological considerations are vanquished by a statement that abstraction is produced by the fundamental operation of capitalist society. “The essence of the commodity abstraction, however, is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in man’s minds but in actions. And yet this does not give ‘abstraction’ a merely metaphysical meaning. It is abstraction in its precise, literal sense [. . .] complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur on the market.”³¹

While considering the historicity of abstraction and its social character, Sohn-Rethel presents us with a materialist investigation of the history of architectural engineering, a passage from Egyptian rope to Greek geometry, in order to draw attention to the fact that:

The Greeks invented a new kind of geometric demonstration. Instead of stretching ropes, they drew lines by ruler which remained on the sheet underneath, and together with more straight lines, formed a permanent figure from which could be recognized geometric laws. [. . .] The geometry of the measurement thus became something quite different from the measurement itself. The manual operation became subordinated to an act of pure thought which was directed solely towards grasping quantitative laws of number or abstract space. [. . .] In order, however, to detach it from such [specific historical transformations within epistemology], a pure form of abstraction had to emerge and be admitted into reflective thought.³²

Thus, real abstraction becomes thought and as such enters the social

universe as a trope of philosophical epistemology. Sohn-Rethel shows that abstraction, other than that of thought, is produced by the social activity linked to the market forces, rather than induced, historical, rather than ahistorical, economic, rather than antieconomic, and can be used to account for specific transformations or mutations within philosophical epistemology throughout the ages and for specific transformations or mutations of its practical applications.

Finally, according to Sohn-Rethel, Marx's introduction of the real abstraction not only allows for the confrontation with social realities of capitalism which classical philosophy, engaged in the act of proving the perfect normalcy of bourgeois society, cannot fathom, but it also sheds light on the conversion of the forms of the social being in the epochs of commodity production into the forms of cognition favored by these epochs.³³ Consequently, the analysis of the real abstraction is not the analysis of the content hidden by the form, but of the form itself. Or as Alberto Toscano succinctly put it: "the secret of real abstraction is precisely *an open secret*, one that is to be discerned in the operations of capitalism rather than in an ideological preoccupation with the concrete truth or hidden essence that the abstractions of capital supposedly occlude."³⁴

If indeed, the intellectual labor is to move away from archeo-historical investigations or from an examination of the flaws and imperfections of a theoretical system to make it function better and toward the investigations of the operations of capitalism, or, as is the case here, the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century, the notion of the real abstraction is most relevant here. To wit: as Marx put forth, capitalism is the culture of abstraction par excellence. It promotes abstraction as a trope of a theory of scientific knowledge undertaken with the aim of elaborating a coherent, all-embracing ideology to suit the relations produced within a capitalist society. It increasingly

abstracts intellectual labor so that it becomes blind to that history and social process which turn it into pure thought. This is an abstraction defined as a fictitious notion not regulated by historical or logical becoming. What Marx provided is the idea of abstraction which is recognized as a social, historical, and transindividual phenomenon. It is produced in accordance with the operations of mercantile, bourgeois, capitalist society. Therefore, the focus should be on the historicity of abstraction as well as the means and strategies used by economic agents to make it capable of articulating an entire society.

How can these insights help us rethink the practices, which proliferated during the Industrial Revolution in eighteenth century London? How can the notion of the real abstraction as defined by Marx/Sohn-Rethel help us debunk the anthropomorphic fetishism embodied in the mental labor of science, the theories of historical knowledge, or in philosophical epistemology? Is it possible to see the Industrial Revolution not as a different system of interpretation, similar to those other systems such as similitude, resemblance, or neo-classical order, but as a spatial practice and activity, which occurs on the market or in public sphere? This practice makes visible, using its specific representational practices, the structures of thought that emerge but that can only be defined by the social effectivity of the market, rather than by the State or the Church, and remain endlessly open to its manipulation.

Ever since trade became “the golden ball,” the real abstraction entered the stage as a force operative in the world. History adds that, whereas political systems come and go, this force operative in mercantile/capitalist society is identified with historical transformations in the ways abstraction has been used and defined, with mutations in the organization and composition of society, with the proliferation and production of new procedures and practices, with transmissible

“know-hows,” and with self-reflexive adjustments in the informational age. Already in 1739/40, David Hume noted the spatial, rather than temporal, aspect of the emergent order of things. In his discussion “Of Contiguity, and Distance in Space and Time,” Hume draws attention to the fact that though distance both in space and time affects the strength of our imagination, “the consequence of the removal in *space* are much inferior to those of a removal in *time*.” Moreover,

Twenty years are certainly but a small distance of time in comparison of what history and even the memory of some may inform them of, and yet I doubt if a thousand leagues, or even the greatest distance of place this globe can admit of, will so remarkably weaken our ideas, and diminish our passions. A *West-India* merchant will tell you, that he is not without concern about what passes in *Jamaica*; tho’ few extend their views so far into futurity, as to dread very remote accidents.³⁵

Hume’s comments are significant for this discussion of the real abstraction at the time of the defining the notion of a pan-Atlantic (spatial) concept of the British Empire in the 1730s and the 1740s. What passes in Jamaica, as the West India merchant will tell you, can have an impact not only on passions but also, and more important, on both the prosaic and less prosaic actions which can occur on the market in the metropolitan London. In the light of these remarks, Hegel’s passage in his introductory lectures on the philosophy of world history should receive a different reading. It is here that Hegel argues that the true history of a nation is realized in the Spirit’s conception of itself being fulfilled in the various, interconnected activities of that nation, such as the state, religion, art, justice, and political laws. “Nations are what their deeds are.” When these activities are connected or when the real abstractions cohere on the same spatial plane, the informing activity

of the Spirit for Hegel could be felt in every individual area. When they are completely integrated, the self-consciousness of the nation will be realized in the lives of the members of the state. The vitality of the state in the individual citizens is what Hegel calls its ethical life.³⁶ Thus, the practice of ethical life in the state is directly connected with its vitality as manifested by the unfolding of the Spirit in time, and by extension of industrial revolution and the existing political or economic systems. To illustrate this point, Hegel uses England as his example. If asked:

Any Englishman will say of himself and his fellow citizens that it is they who rule the East Indies and the oceans of the world, who dominate world trade, who have a parliament and trial by jury, etc. It is deeds such as these which give the nation its sense of self-esteem.³⁷

Sohn-Rethel comments regarding Hegel's dialectics of the real change as the idealization of the bourgeois world "rising to the height of 'thinking' and 'being' embracing each other in the perfection of the bourgeois [Prussian] State" come to mind.³⁸

Rather than focusing on the long or wide eighteenth century to explore the operations of the Industrial Revolution and of the Enlightenment, this research project draws attention to fragments—the events and the representational practices—which register and exemplify the process of their detachment from the operations of the emergent mercantile culture and their becoming subordinated to an act of public or academic thought. This act of abstracting when given a concrete shape has remained visible as an architectural style, a playtext, or a pamphlet which was archived in a place designed for it, or was deemed irrelevant by past and present imaginations. If, indeed, the secret of real abstraction is so open that it becomes invisible, this project is not after the truth or the essence of the Enlightenment in order to reveal

the flaws in the system and how to make it better, but after the real abstraction itself and its actions, prosaic activities, and mutations which reveal how historical and ideological abstracting is indeed blind to the processes and operations that control the production of knowledge for the benefit of the academic discipline.

If, indeed, the discussion of the operations of the Industrial Revolution in eighteenth century London can benefit from bringing to the fore the notion of a real abstraction, then, it is worth considering how these representational practices articulated and rearticulated the social relations and the new economic policies of the Industrial Revolution, and how this new economic action determined and controlled representational practices in different cultural spaces. If such a proposition is tangible, these different cultural spaces, joining a journal, a treatise, a museum, a trade manual, and a theatre are not taken to reflect the existing conditions by providing evidence archived in an archive, but reflect those conditions through the ways in which their representational practices participated in how power operated to form an everyday understanding of social and economic relations and to orchestrate the ways in which consent necessary to reproduce those relations was secured. Both a living and an abstract body, served, in this formulation, as an agent through which forms of (capitalist) personhood were put on display in order to normalize a new economy. These texts and events should not, consequently, be seen as objects from which information can be extracted or as a cultural tool for the construction and deconstruction of the past. Rather, these texts and events are dynamic sites where statements controlled by the real abstractions of the emergent capitalism of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth-century were formed and transformed.

The Treaty of Utrecht and Henry Smeathman's game of golf at Bance Island's slave factory must not be seen as the records

for archeo-historical investigations. They are real abstractions. The real abstractions which are not only capable of articulating the forces operating in an entire English society in the eighteenth century, but also, albeit in a mutated form, of abstracting intellectual labor in most twentieth and twenty-first-century scholarship on Enlightenment thought.

Notes

- 1 David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-2.
- 2 To substantiate this argument, this research project will investigate:
 - the writings by Joseph Addison and Daniel Defoe which participated in the process of popularization of the merchant-patriot ideal at the time when the Parliament could issue (in 1711) the Member's Qualification Act barring the mercantile class from accepting certain political functions in the state;
 - the writings of George Berkley and David Hume contradicting the Cartesian and Lockean tradition of knowledge production and reception, and, together with Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, participate in establishing a new trajectory for knowledge production, which, in an important way, gave credibility to mercantile operations; the manuals for apprentices (Samuel Richardson), the essays arguing for the recognition of the patriotic status of merchants (Daniel Defoe), the pamphlets abstracting luxury and the operations of the mercantile class (Bernard Mandeville), and a sample of plays, which chose the mercantile class as their subject-matter, for example, George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), shifting earlier versions of merchants into a new persona acting for the benefit of the state and the people;
 - and, finally, the establishment of institutions exhibiting the operations of the pan-Atlantic community of traders, the staging of playtexts featuring them, such as, George Colman's (the Elder) *The English Merchant* (1767), Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771), and Samuel Foot's *The Nabob* (1772), the construction of new forms of personhood in the magazines for men and women as well as a series of events whose function was to normalize sexual practices and the economy of desire in the late eighteenth-century London—and to be more specific in the 1770s—for the benefit of the emergent capitalism of the Industrial Revolution.
- 3 For general overview, see, for example, Mary Fullbrook, *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002), Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Revolution to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997); for individual discussions of different concepts of history, see, for example, G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997), John Brewer, *A Sentimental Murder* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).
- 4 Keith Jenkins, *Why History?: Ethics and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1999) and *Refiguring History* (London: Routledge, 2002) See also Joan Scott, "History-writing as critique," and Ewa Domanska, "Historiographical criticism: a manifesto"

- in *Manifestos for History*, eds. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 5 Gabrielle Spiegel, "History and Postmodernism," *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 270.
 - 6 The term "incredulity toward metanarratives" comes from Jean-François Lyotard's introduction to his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.
 - 7 Fredrick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 9.
 - 8 See "Historical Archives, Events and Facts: History Writing as Fragmentary Performance," *Performance Research* 7, 4 (Winter 2002): 3-11.
 - 9 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 81.
 - 10 See Jacques Derrida's text on Cixous published under the title of *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) for a detailed treatment of these terms.
 - 11 de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 97.
 - 12 See Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke, trans. Wilma A. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. and intro. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988).
 - 13 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 25.
 - 14 See *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan Charles Kors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); or Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), *Writing Race across the Atlantic World: Medieval to Modern*, eds. Philip Beidler and Gary Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nassbaum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 - 15 *Race and Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chikwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 5.
 - 16 Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.
 - 17 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 43.
 - 18 Sylvania Tomaselli, "The Enlightenment Debate on Women" and Joan Wallach Scott, "French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man'" in *The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader*, ed. Paul Hyland (London: Routledge, 2003), 401-5; 406-9.

- 19 Horkheimer and Adorno, 1.
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- 22 Horkheimer and Adorno, 18.
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- 24 Andrew Fletcher, *An Account of a Conversation Concerning a Right Regulation of Governments for the Common Good Mankind* in *Andrew Fletcher: Political Works*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 193.
- 25 Jack P. Greene, "Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution," *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. P. J. Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 208–13.
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- 27 Sohn-Rethel, 33.
- 28 Sohn-Rethel, 19.
- 29 Sohn-Rethel, 16.
- 30 Sohn-Rethel, 26.
- 31 Sohn-Rethel, 20.
- 32 Sohn-Rethel, 102.
- 33 Sohn-Rethel, 31.
- 34 Alberto Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," *Rethinking Marxism* 20.2 (April 2008): 282.
- 35 David Hume, "Of Contiguity, and Distance in Space and Time," *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II.3.7.
- 36 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. and intro. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 55.
- 37 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 103.
- 38 Sohn-Rethel, 16.

Curriculum Vitae

Michal Kobialka is a Professor of Theatre at the Department of Theatre Arts & Dance, University of Minnesota. He has published over 75 articles, essays and review in *Årsberetning* (Denmark), *Assaph* (Israel), *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Journal of Theatre and Drama* (Israel), *Medieval Perspectives*, *Modern Drama* (Canada), *Performing Arts Journal*, *Performance Research* (England), *Theatre Annual*, *Sala Preta* (Brazil), *The Drama Review*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre History Studies*, *Theatre Nordic Studies* (Sweden), *Theatre Research International* (England), *Theatre Survey*, *Slavic and East European Journal*, *Soviet and East-European Performance*, and *Yearbook of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Fine Arts*. He has presented papers on medieval, contemporary European theatre, and theatre historiography at various regional, national, and international conferences.

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