

Commodity Fetishism: Marx's Dialectic of Content and Form

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1. Overview

Thought flies free of the mundane world. It flies free and constructs figures and fantasies, concepts and illusions. It leads and it misleads. It is in excess of the material, habitual, time-bound world of everyday life. This to my mind is why Marx adds the section on the fetish character of the commodity and its secret to his chapter on the theory of value. The thesis of the chapter, read as a whole, is that the double character of the commodity (the commodity form of the product of labour or the value-form of the commodity) gives rise to a substitution of this for that, as actual as it is unreasonable, which is detectable by asking after the historical and material conditions of the validity of formulae and expressions of value.

Marx saw *Capital* as a work of science and so do I. Whether good science or bad science; whether a world historical event that established a new scientific paradigm or fundamentally confused are judgements I leave to those who see some point in making them. What I think is significant in this context is that science, for Marx, is as much a product of social conditions as wealth or religion. Classical political economy, in his view, had already attained the status of a science. Social relations of production in industrialising Europe had evolved to that point at which the concepts necessary to put the study of political economy on a scientific basis had been grasped. Given however the class structure of these societies, the role of class struggle in processes of social change, and the location of mental labour within a division of labour separating mental and manual labour, Marx's persuasion is that the further advance of this science should take the form of its critique from a standpoint that is for the working class.

For my part returning to Marx on commodity fetishism is returning to a classical thinker of the social realm whose idea of fetishism has long struck me as implicated in the various ways in which the promises of legal

rights fail those most in need of them.¹ But having been persuaded in the meantime by Hegel's idea of thought's dialectical and speculative logical foundation it is a return in disagreement with Marx's idea that Hegel's logical dialectic stood wrong way up and around. Certainly Marx thought that scientific knowledge was conceptually mediated and structured but he maintained that what, as independent of such knowledge finds its objectivity, is not the logical forms which structure and contain human thinking, but the very nature of things which Hegel suspends in the artifice of constructing a purely logical realm.²

Quite apart however from the point that Hegel makes no notable contribution to political economy, he too is not to be taken whole. If it no longer makes epistemological sense to me to posit a material reality that is independent of human knowledge of it, I regard Hegel's enthronement of philosophical consciousness at the very summit of human self-awareness, as a conceit. As regards Hegel's idea of a logic that would replace metaphysics and the means and methods that might accomplish or realise the practical-theoretical task of so doing, it is a conceit to be set aside by recourse to mathematical methods and reasoning, that is to mathematical logic. From the premise then that Hegel's idea of thought's dialectical and speculative logical foundation, rid of its philosophical conceit, may gain a basis in constructive mathematical practice, my question became where Marx's thinking of the fetish character of the commodity, should be revised. My revisionary intent is to dissolve the opposition he supposes between ideal and material foundations of thought. The revision of Hegel's idea removes what I consider to be a justified objection to his thought that may well have motivated Marx's turn from it. My motivation for persisting with Marx's idea of the fetish character of the commodity is the belief that it is a profoundly speculative and dialectical thinking of the social realm. My sense, that in its flawed brilliance this idea remains, in some way, critical to thinking the social and cultural dimensions of law, stayed stubbornly in place. But in what way? And how might that be winked out of its lair in the complex fabric of Marx's desire, commitments and thought?

¹ See generally [Kerruish 1991].

² Referring here to [Hegel 1969] at 36; [Hegel 1812] at 26–7. Here, as with citations to Marx, I cite the English translation used with its date of publication followed by the German edition used with the original date of publication.

This paper documents a re-reading of the first chapter of *Capital* vol. I that has been made with these questions and aims in view. The following section ‘Preliminaries’ deals selectively with the first three sections of that chapter relating them back to observations made in the Postface to the second edition particularly as they concern Marx’s relation to Hegel. Marx’s engagement with commodity fetishism in the final section of his chapter is too often read in isolation from these earlier sections. Such readings miss the shift from analysis of what the double character of the commodity *is* to what it *does*. The third section of the paper, titled ‘The Fetish Character of the Commodity and its Secret’ after the final section of Marx’s chapter, moves off from this observation, reading Marx as re-traversing the abstract theory of the first three sections from the perspective of action: the action, or if you will agency of forms of value in perception and representation, in human efforts at deciphering the effects of their own incompletely intentional practices.

The final section of the paper, ‘Religion, Science and Ideology’ draws on the reading and commentary of the previous sections to argue that the famed analogy with religion, the flight to its misty realm to which Marx sees himself obliged, is a disastrous consequence of, on the one hand, his rejection of Hegel’s idea of thought’s logical foundation and, on the other a narrative of European social, scientific and cultural progress toward freedom which Marx inherited from Hegel and to which he trusted the emancipatory force of socialist revolution.

It will be said, going back the *Paris Manuscripts* and the use made there of a notion of fetishism; or going even further back to his Bonn days and the acquaintance then made with the term,³ that the analogy with religion was always the leading idea: that the forced flight to that misty realm is all guise and that fetishism here as there is about objectification as externalisation and alienation of a human essence. That is the normative or ideological reading and I do not argue that Marx is not motivated by a mighty passion to change what he sees as changing and changeable in the interest of realising, in this world, his ideal of the social as being for others. What I will argue is that the theoretical character of the insight that connects the fetish character of the commodity to its double character

³ Marx came across de Brosses’ *Du culte des dieux fetiches* in the course of intensive studies in the history of art and religion in Bonn in 1842. According to Pietz the term ‘Fetischismus’ was coined by de Brosses [Pietz 1993]; [Böhme 2001].

is lost to this move, effaced by what Marx assumes is unchanging and unchangeable: laws of thought that, as some people are still inclined to say, cannot be questioned because any (sane/reasonable/rational) questioning of them would have to use them.

My thesis is that in rejecting Hegel's logical dialectic, Marx rejects a notion of objectivity, the objectivity of illusion, which he then re-instates as fetish phenomena. These he names fetishism, via the analogy with religion and here, I shall argue, he loses an idea, an equivocation which, if left as an instantiation in the social realm of the objectivity of illusion, is both relevant and valuable for legal theory. Rejecting Hegel's logical dialectic Marx is disarmed in the face of his own perception of that very excess of thought that haunts logics of the understanding. What, it seems, Marx does not suspect or envisage, is that Hegel's questioning of the universality of so called laws of thought is an idea which will find its time in and through a new science of mathematical logic.⁴

This may seem to leave out of account the role played in Marx's thinking by laws of nature and the contrasting laws of social change which he imagines himself to have discovered. In part that is the fault of the attempted brevity of an overview. There is no doubt that Marx's engagement in the early chapters of *Capital* with the logic of a discourse, classical political economy, is marked as a work of nineteenth century science. I hope that will come out with the force proper to it in my reading. But there is a more substantial reason for taking the issue back to the diversity of formal logical systems which have emerged from the mathematical approach to logic. Whereas I cannot imagine that Marx, counterfactually projected into the twentieth century, would have rejected the new physics, I doubt that he would have moved from classical logic and set theory.⁵ Classical logic is the logic of realist thought, Platonist or materialist. That cannot, I think, be disassociated from Marx's rejection, early and late, of Hegel's logical dialectic. Logically, Marx insists, particulars, whether objects or forms, must hold the grammatical place of a subject to which predicates ascribe properties. Indeed it is thus that Marx sees

⁴ Such questioning, it is true, rarely connects to Hegel. It is however part of my enterprise to make that connection.

⁵ While Alain Badiou in his *Being and Event* makes no gesture to this aspect of Marx's thinking, his re-writing of Zermelo–Fraenkel set theory as ontology, with its defence of classical logic, strikes me as consistent with Marx's logical classicism.

in expressions of value, the mystifying inversion that he attributes to Hegel's logic. Thus as regards the new logic, my hunch is that he would have made company with Zermelo and approved putting set theory on an axiomatic basis to block the antinomies that emerged within it and which, in their logical or property theoretic form, breathe life into Hegel's idea for a dialectical and speculative logic.

Revisions are always fraught with the risk and subject to the charge of having cut out just that moment in a thinking that makes it memorable. Where, as here, I am tampering with Marx's idea of material foundations of consciousness, a justification seems to be called for. Marx *cannot* accept that thought itself is at odds with itself because 'thought itself', for him, is thought that forgets its absolute dependence on the production and reproduction of material life. This absolute is just that which is equivocated, leadingly-misleadingly by fetish phenomena only then to be re-instated as 'fetishism' by the analogy with religion.

Bitter fruits! I take the view that the history of ideas is a comedy of errors with a dark side of crime that calls theory to account for the privileges that condition and enable its productions and performances. That takes me into the ironies, the conceits, the outrageous happenstances of place and time in that history, yet with the aim of recuperating objective insights and notions of objectivity from the present foundational malaise.

2. Preliminaries

The task Marx set himself in the section of his chapter on value immediately preceding that on commodity fetishism, "a task never even attempted by bourgeois economics", is to show the origin of the universal form of value in the simple, isolated or accidental form of value. The universal form has the entire universe of commodities on the left hand side of an equation and a universal equivalent on the right. The money-form of value is not formally different from it. It is preceded by the "total or expanded form of value" (z commodity A = u commodity B or = v commodity C or = w commodity D or = x commodity E or + etc) which, in turn is preceded by the simple form, 20 yards of linen = 1 coat; or $5x = 2y$. "The whole secret of the form of value lies hidden" in this simple form, Marx writes.⁶ Its solution is within our reach, once we grasp the

⁶ [Marx 1976] at 139; [Marx 1873] at 63.

point that human labour power “creates value, but is not itself value”. It *becomes* value in its congealed state in objective form (*gegenständlicher Form*), and that value can only be expressed as an ‘objectivity’ (*Gegenständlichkeit*): “a thing which is materially different to the linen itself and yet common to the linen and all other commodities”.⁷

The analysis of the simple form distinguishes its two ‘poles’, the relative form of value and the equivalent form. Discussing various peculiarities of the latter, Marx endorses and praises Aristotle’s early investigations of the value-form.⁸ Aristotle’s genius, according to Marx, is to have seen the equality relation in the value expression of commodities. In particular, he accepts the idea that the equation of two different commodities in the simple value form (‘5 beds = 1 house’), since it involves things that are distinct to the senses, requires a qualitative equation and that this would not be possible in the lack of an essential identity. “There can be no exchange” he [Aristotle] says “without equality, and no equality without commensurability”.⁹

The Aristotelian assumption of a ‘third’ a common substance or identical essence which enables the commensuration of qualitatively unlike things is not inconsistent with identifying the act of commensuration in the practice of exchange or counting as equal. These are aspects of inquiry that answer different questions. The latter asks after a social practice, asks after what it is that people do and the conditions of that doing which at some stage or another results in a concept of value entering economic discourse. That is the perspective that Marx defers to the final section of the chapter. The former seeks truth conditions of expressions of equality. That is the issue here. In this discussion Marx, accepting the need for an essential identity as a condition of a valid equation, explains why Aristotle did not get far with his analysis of value: he could not grasp human labour power as the condition of commensurability in a society founded on the labour of slaves and concluded that the equation could “only be something foreign to the true nature of things . . . ‘a makeshift for practical purposes’”.¹⁰ He lacked, so Marx, *a concept of value*, not for

⁷ Ibid at 142; 65–6.

⁸ Ibid at 151–2; 73–4.

⁹ Ibid at 151; 73–4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

want of genius, but because the concept of human equality was not yet fixed in popular opinion (*Volksvorurteil*: literally, ‘popular prejudice’).

The concept of value, according to Marx, answers the question “What is the same (*das Gleiche*), that is the common substance which, within the expression of value of the chairs [5 chairs = 1 house] the house represents for the chairs?”¹¹ It is labour, abstractly conceived as human labour; that which is ‘really’ or ‘in truth’ equal in the relation expressed. It is thus that the “power of abstraction” replaces microscopes and chemical reagents in the analysis of economic forms,¹² if only when social conditions permit. On the other and prior hand,

[l]abour ... as the creator of use-values, as useful labour, is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself.¹³

Useful labour, or better labouring, this concrete, sensuous, practical activity, will later in *Capital* in the context of the labour process, be characterised as an unrest (*Unruhe*).¹⁴ It gives the sense in which concrete useful labour takes the place in Marx’s thinking of the unrest of thought at odds with itself in Hegel’s: of the restlessness of the negative, in Nancy’s phrase.

This is the sense in which Marx’s theory of value is a *labour* theory of value and a labour *theory* of value. He assumes, in addition to the metaphysics of the equality relation and the conditioning principle of concrete, useful labour, the achieved status of classical political economy as a science which investigates the “internal framework” of bourgeois production relations¹⁵ and undertakes its critique. This assumption locates him

¹¹ Ibid at 151; 74.

¹² Ibid at 90; 12.

¹³ Ibid at 133; 57.

¹⁴ “Labour has become bound up in its object: labour has been objectified, the object has been worked on. What on the side of the worker appeared in the form of an unrest now appears, on the side of the product in the form of being [*Sein*] as a fixed immobile characteristic. The worker has spun and the product is a spinning” (ibid at 287: 195). The German ‘Er hat gesponnen, und das Produkt ist ein Gespinst’ plays on figurative senses of ‘Gespinst’ that take in lying and fabricating. These senses might better be captured for English readers by translating ‘Gespinst’ as ‘spun yarn’.

¹⁵ Ibid at 174 n.34; 95 n.32.

within an established discourse, with its conventionally established categories. He writes, in his Postface to the second edition of a more rigorous “derivation of value by analysis of the equations in which every exchange-value is expressed” making clear the discursive context of that analysis.¹⁶ The aim (and accomplishment) of this opening chapter of *Capital* is to revise the categorial framework, value, use-value and exchange-value, thus their determinations and mutual relations, bringing his approach and methods with their implicit claims, theoretical and practical/critical, to that task.

Notoriously, in that same Postface, Marx writes a striking homage to Hegel, after forcefully declaring his method “in its foundations not only different from the Hegelian but exactly opposite to it”.¹⁷ In general it seems to me that Marx has the idea of identifying the fetish character of the commodity in order to dispel a mystifying logic of the concept that is repeated in the value-expression. While the passage that most explicitly articulates this point appears only in an Appendix to the first edition which was subsequently dropped, the idea of the ‘inversion’ (*Verdrehung*) of the value-expression is kept.¹⁸ But the basis of that undertaking is the analysis of the first three sections and that in turn proceeds from his decision to take the individual commodity as elementary or cell form

¹⁶ Ibid at 94; 18.

¹⁷ Ibid at 102; 27.

¹⁸ Ibid at 150, 72 and see further below at p.31. The first edition passage reads as follows: “This *inversion* whereby the sensibly-concrete counts only as appearance-form of the abstractly-universal, and it is not to the contrary that the abstractly-universal counts as property of the concrete — this inversion characterizes the value-expression. At the same time it renders difficult its comprehension. If I say: Roman Law and German Law are both law, that is obvious. But if I say, on the other hand, *the Law* (this abstract entity) *realizes itself* in Roman Law and German Law (these concrete laws), then the connection becomes mystical” ([Marx 1867] at 56–57). Compare a younger Marx’s Feuerbachian objection to Hegel’s ‘subject-predicate inversion’ in his *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*. “Had Hegel started with the real subjects as the bases of the state it would not have been necessary for him to let the state become subjectified in a mystical way. ‘However the truth of subjectivity’ says Hegel, ‘is attained only in a subject, and the truth of personality only in a person’. This too is a mystification. Subjectivity is a characteristic of subjects and personality is characteristic of the person. Instead of considering them to be predicates of their subjects, Hegel makes the predicates independent and then lets them be subsequently and mysteriously converted into their subjects” ([Marx 1970] at 23). Further references to this repeated criticism are given by O’Malley in his Introduction at xxxiii.

of the appearance of the wealth of capitalist societies as his ‘subject’ or object of analysis. It is a decision, I would say, which again reflecting the comments on Hegel in the Postface, answers the question, ‘With what should a critical science of political economy begin’.

We should go back to the remarkable opening sentence of *Capital*.

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as a ‘monstrously immense collection of commodities (*ungeheure Warensammlung*)’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form.¹⁹

Marx quotes from the opening sentence of his 1859 *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, where he gives the individual commodity as “*elementarisches Dasein*”. His decision to begin with the commodity is already reached, presumably as a result of the investigations (1857–8) comprising the *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, but the shift from *Dasein* (existence) to form attests further deliberation and the role of a form–content dichotomy in organising the text.²⁰ The individual commodity, singled out by theoretical artifice from the multiplicity, the “monstrously immense collection of commodities” in which the wealth of capitalist societies appears, and given as elementary or cell-form of that wealth knots quite some threads together. It is the content of a decision or judgement reached on the question of beginning. Described as “the simplest economic *concretum*”,²¹ it is (relatively) concrete, a particular, in comparison with the universals of its various attributes use-value, value and exchange value. As such, and holding the place in the expressions of value of the (grammatical) subject, it is the basis of a dialectic that is ‘right way up and around’. And, subject(-matter) of a work written from a standpoint of viewing “the development of the economic formation of society . . . as a process of natural history”²² it holds this formal place within a narrative pursuant on Marx’s rejection

¹⁹ [Marx 1976] at 125; [Marx 1873] at 49.

²⁰ Gyorgy Markus argues a partial shift between the critical theory of *Grundrisse* and *Capital* ([Markus 1986] at 126–145, esp. 139f.). While sharing what he terms an Aristotelian-Hegelian content and form dichotomy, he sees the course of exposition in the earlier work organised “according to the principle of ascendance from the abstract to the concrete” whereas in *Capital* it goes according to that of essence and appearance (142).

²¹ [Marx 1879] at 215.

²² [Marx 1976] at 92; [Marx 1873] at 16.

of the generic difference between logical and historical dialectics affirmed by Hegel.²³ The chapter is on the theory of value and involves a critique of the theory of value in classical political economy.²⁴ But it is intended at, is about, ‘commodity’ in a phenomenological sense. ‘Form’ here is not then just a metaphysical category, determined only by place within a set of abstract structures. It also is more specific: an appearance form, an elementary or cell-form, a natural form, a value form, a form of expression and more. Content depends on the type of form at issue.

The individual commodity will turn out to be contradictory, a thing with a double character of use-thing and value-thing. As ‘elementary form’ it has this contradiction within itself, but as ‘appearance-form’ it is constituted in its relation to another commodity and the expression of that relation in the ‘value-form’. Thus, later, after consideration of its dual character and after a section on the dual character of the labour embodied in commodities, at the beginning of the section ‘The value-form, or exchange-value’ we get to “the form of commodities”, the way they appear “in so far as they possess a double form i.e. a natural form and a value form”.²⁵ But “first of all”, as a first step in the analysis of this subject, “the commodity . . . is an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind”. Tied into (conditioned) by the physical properties of commodities, use-values “in the form of society to be considered here are also material bearers (*Träger*) of — exchange-value”.²⁶

²³ Marx’s acerbic insistence in his ‘Marginal Notes on Wagner’ that he does “not proceed on the basis of ‘concepts’ hence also not from the ‘value-concept’ ” but from “the simplest social form in which the product of labour in contemporary society manifests itself, and this is as ‘commodity’ ” ([Marx 1879] at 214), as the statement there that his approach does not set “ ‘logical’ and ‘historical’ concepts in contrariety” (ibid at 221) underlines these points.

²⁴ “As regards value in general, classical political economy in fact nowhere distinguishes explicitly and with a clear awareness between labour as it appears in the value of a product, and the same labour as it appears in the product’s use-value. Of course the distinction is made in practice, since labour is treated sometimes from its quantitative aspect, and at other times qualitatively. But it does not occur to the economists that a purely quantitative distinction between the kinds of labour presupposes their qualitative unity or equality, and therefore their reduction to abstract human labour” ([Marx 1976] at 173 n.33; [Marx 1873] at 94 n.31).

²⁵ [Marx 1976] at 138; [Marx 1873] at 62.

²⁶ Ibid at 126; 50.

‘Matter’ — ‘stuff’, ‘body’, ‘substratum’ — nature’s provision to the wealth of societies with its ‘coarsely sensuous existence’ tends to be under-emphasised in accounts of Marx’s thinking which, quite properly emphasise the practical character of his materialism: the role of social practices, the situatedness of social personae and things within historically developed relations of production, and the integration of political commitments, aims and ideals in theoretical standpoints. Individual commodities as use-values and bearers of exchange-value are physical things with properties such as existence in space and time, weight, chemical composition that are investigated in mathematical and natural sciences. The value of a commodity, in Marx’s analysis, *cannot be* a “geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property” of the commodity. These properties are relevant only to its use-value. “On the other hand, it is just the abstraction from their use-value, which evidently (*augenscheinlich*) characterises the exchange relation of commodities.²⁷ Value pertains to a social relation between two different commodities — ‘social’ in the sense that it is a product of human practice.

The practical nature of Marx’s materialism with its consequential doctrine of the conceptually and historically mediated character of scientific knowledge of these objects may be its saving grace. But this chapter is incomprehensible without the theoretical sense of that ‘cannot be’. The sense in which use-value is the contrary of value and its appearance form in bourgeois society, exchange-value, depends on it, as also the distinction Marx makes between value and exchange-value. Political economy as a science, like mathematical and natural sciences, seeks knowledge of laws and the ‘objectivity’ of its knowledge rests in laws, but as laws of social change these are “special laws that regulate the origin existence, development and death of a given social organism and its replacement by another higher one”.²⁸ The distinction made here between laws of nature and laws of political economy is critical to Marx’s theory of value in its divergence from classical political economy.²⁹ The independent existence of matter in nature posited — wrongly to my mind — by Marx against the independence

²⁷ Ibid at 127; at 51–2.

²⁸ Ibid at 102; 27, quoting a description of which Marx approved.

²⁹ Rosa Luxemburg considers that a rejection of an absolute universality inhering in a natural law perspective on science and its laws is constitutive of Marx’s critical approach ([Luxemburg 1913] at 67f).

that Hegel vests in the form of the logical Notion,³⁰ distinguishes their ideas of ‘foundation’. The various secrets, puzzles and mysteries that accompany “the value-form of the commodity or the commodity form of the product of labour” are foundational questions, questions basically of the ‘objectivity’ of the value of commodities.

By undertaking the task with which I began these preliminaries, that of showing the simple value-form to be the origin of the money-form, Marx confronts himself with a problem of equality relations: a problem of the difference or sameness of equality and identity which, in the work of Gottlob Frege, will write its own chapter in the history of symbolic logic and the foundations of arithmetic. But the emergence of that problem lies in the future and indeed in a purely formal science. The problem as Marx states it at the beginning of the section on the value-form, concerns the objectivity of the value of commodities (*Wertgegenständlichkeit der Waren*). It “differs from Dame Quickly ‘in the sense that one does not know where to have it’”.³¹ Not an “atom of matter” enters it and while, as Marx bids his reader recall, commodities possess this objectivity only in so far as they are expressions of abstract human labour so that, being purely social in character, it can only appear in a social relation between commodities, this is merely a re-statement of the problem: a summary statement which calls for analysis of the value-form and its secret.

This secret, that which is hidden in the value-relation between two commodities, is fairly quickly aired, first through Marx’s analysis but then with evident paradox by the commodity, the value of which is being expressed. The linen in association with the coat

reveals its thoughts in a language with which it alone is familiar, the language of commodities. In order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, i.e. is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself. In order to inform us that its sublime objectivity as a value differs from its stiff and starchy existence as a body, it says that value has the appearance of a coat, and therefore that in so far as the linen itself is a value-thing, it and the coat are as like as two peas.³²

³⁰ [Hegel 1969] at 586; [Hegel 1816] at 18; and see [Kerruish 2006] at 41.

³¹ Ibid at 138; 62.

³² Ibid at 66–7; 143–4.

This is a foretaste of things to come and the thread of continuity between the first three and the last sections which, not without ground, is so regularly severed. For if Marx will have it that, if one is investigating the production of value, there is “nothing mysterious” in having to consider the human labour power expended in tailoring and in weaving in terms of their general characteristic of being human labour, the ‘inversion’ (*Verdrehung*) that prompts him to begin the section on commodity fetishism with the mystical, magical dance of a table, is stated in more or less the same breath: “in the value expression of the commodity, the matter is stood on its head (*wird die Sache verdreht*)”.³³ It is at this point in his text that the discussion of Aristotle is called in aid.

Two secrets or one? And to what extent is it or are they phantoms of Marx’s persuasion that the sought after objectivity exists? Or if not that, are they products of a set of metaphysical persuasions that will not leave such objectivity where it is, in a form of expression, in language or in the thought expressed in the formula? Or, as I am suggesting, does the secret have a parallel in the enigmatic behaviour of signs which “suddenly display their own selves when they are combined by means of the sign for identity of content.”³⁴ The first question should not detain us. Resolving this problem of the objectivity of the value of commodities goes through the breach of an ‘inversion’. It is to Althusser’s credit that he inveighed against the ambiguities of this term and too hasty investments in the “rapidly written lines” of the Postface to the second edition of *Capital*.³⁵ I would redescribe to say that Marx confronts a certain ‘objectivity of illusion’.³⁶ It is an objectivity that is constituted in the flash of an eye: in

³³ Ibid at 150, 72.

³⁴ [Frege 1879] at 20.

³⁵ [Althusser 1967] at 17. I am also sympathetic to his suggestion that, as Marx used it, ‘inversion’ is a word lacking a concept. But I part company with Althusser early, with his claim that the term holds the place of an absent question of the specific difference between Marxist and Hegelian dialectic, not because I suppose that Marx was fully aware of what he was doing theoretically, rather more because I find the terms ‘Marxist’, ‘Hegelian’ and ‘dialectic’ too fuzzy to yield a ‘specific difference’ with substantial theoretical content (cf. [Althusser and Balibar 1970] at 32f.).

³⁶ The phrase is taken from Hegel’s homage to Kant’s recuperation of dialectic as a “necessary function of reason” in the Introduction to his *Science of Logic*. Hegel writes of the “*objectivity of the illusion* and the *necessity of the contradiction* which belongs to the nature of thought determinations” ([Hegel 1969] at 56; [Hegel 1812] at 54). See further [Kerruish 2006] at 30.

just that abstraction from their use-value, which “evidently (*augenscheinlich*) characterises the exchange relation of commodities.”³⁷ Its secret, to my mind, has gained a laboratory in the very strange universe of mathematical logic, a universe so strange as to be devoid of and applicable to that stuff, body, substratum which Marx will have it is being abstracted from, which he encases and encloses in ‘nature’ and, differently, in the concept of value.

As I have said, for Marx, the solution to the secret of the simple form of value is within reach once it is grasped that human labour power creates value but is not itself value. Does the puzzle or riddle of money (*Geldrätsel*) disappear then, as promised, when the trace connecting the simple form to the “dazzling” money form has been detected and the forms of expression of value analysed?³⁸ Not entirely: the analysis shows, so Marx, that the money form of value is not formally different to the universal form. Gold takes the place of linen as universal equivalent. “The advance consists only in that the form of direct and universal exchangeability, in other words, the universal equivalent form, has now by social custom finally become entwined with the specific natural form of the commodity gold.”³⁹ The significant transformations are between the simple, total or expanded, and universal forms.⁴⁰ But a formal analysis of what the double form of the commodity *is*, in a social theory yet lacks an account of what it *does* and why it does it. These transformations and the double character of the commodity and of the labour embodied in it will now be re-traversed, re-covered, from the perspective of its ‘activity’: the perspective of practice, based for Marx on what people do, how they perceive the products of that doing and, if they are political economists, represent it.

³⁷ [Marx 1976] at 127; [Marx 1873] at 51–2.

³⁸ *Ibid* at 139; 62. The Fowkes’ translation of ‘puzzle’ or ‘riddle’ as of the ‘secret’ to be considered shortly as ‘mystery’ doesn’t allow for the sense of this question.

³⁹ *Ibid* at 162: 84.

⁴⁰ The last, the transformation to the universal form brings, for Marx, a simplification and unification (*ibid* at 79: 157). Constructed by a totalisation over a potentially infinite series of value relations, constitutive of the universe of commodities through the exclusion of one of their party to serve as their universal equivalent, it represents yet another mode of abstraction: one that seems lately to be taken as some kind of original sin.

3. ‘The Fetish Character of the Commodity and its Secret’

The value-form of the commodity or the commodity form of the product of labour: Marx treats them as synonymous in his Preface to the first edition of *Capital*. The difference is modal, a shift from analysis of what the double character of the commodity is and its origin in the simple value-form to what it does. It is a difference neither in the subject of the chapter (the commodity) nor its topic (the theory of value), only an order of exposition that could have been otherwise. Still, it should come as no surprise, that the latter perspective will provide the occasion for a greater emphasis on the practical dimensions of Marx’s thinking.

The section is written in a single piece, without subdivision, but it also, more or less systematically, shifts in endeavour. It first describes and names the phenomenon, then explains it, then seeks to dispel it, then addresses itself to bourgeois political economy in the form of a critique of its theory of value. Value and values are bewilders, incomprehensible, without paying attention to that which, through their forms they themselves conceal.

Which is not to say that this text is not itself bewildering! I think it is clear that Marx regards the fetish character of the commodity as an actual social phenomenon of commodity producing societies within which capitalist production is dominant. It shall disappear with the disappearance of capitalist social relations. His explanation of why this is so is also relatively clear: it is a phenomenon of social relations of commodity production within which producers labour in private, enclosed from and independently of other producers.

I say relatively clear because the notions of ‘private’ and ‘social’ are very thin or abstract here. What, as a matter of the method of political economy has been presupposed, “the subject, society”,⁴¹ is given a few

⁴¹ As stated in the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, the method of political economy presupposes “the subject, society” ([Marx 1973] at 101–2; [Marx 1857–1858] at 21–2). This follows an account of the “reproduction of the concrete by way of thought” that is accomplished by Hegelian dialectic and the illusion as regards the nature of reality into which that very accomplishment, so Marx, lead Hegel. Marx appears to have had second thoughts as to the methodological reflections of this Introduction and probably intended the (1859) Preface to *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* to take their place ([Marx 1859] at LIII). Certainly it is this later formulation of his foundation that he repeats in *Capital* ([Marx 1976] at 175 n.35; [Marx 1873] at 96 n.33). I don’t see that either this or the partial shift between *Grundrisse* and

bare determinants here: just a few initial pen strokes. It is characterised by a “spontaneously arisen” or naturally grown (*naturwüchsig*)⁴² social division of labour which assigns to individual useful labours a character as heterogenous types of useful labour. The ‘private’ is sketched only in terms of mutual independence and isolation of the acts of labour. Within these sparse determinants, the contention is that the social character of production, while in itself unproblematic and present “as soon as humans work for each other in any way”,⁴³ is increasingly disguised in the course of history, reaching an apogee in capitalist social formations.

It is also clear that for Marx the mystical character of the commodity comes neither from its use-value nor from the “nature of the determinants of value”: useful work, time and social relations between humans working for each other. It comes from the form of the commodity with its double character as use-value and value. Within this form the equality of human labour, time (duration) as the measure of the expenditure of human labour, and social relations between producers all receive doubles. The problems already begin in trying to decipher the double of the equality of human labour.

Die Gleichheit der menschlichen Arbeiten erhält die sachliche
Form der gleichen Wertgegenständlichkeit der Arbeitsprodukte
...⁴⁴

The thought here, better captured in the Moore and Aveling translation, is to set up the equality of products of labour in their all being, indiscriminately, values, as the double. Words have a hard time getting at *Doppelgänger!*

The mysterious character of the commodity form consists simply therein, that it mirrors back to humans the social character of their own labour as the objective character of their very own

Capital discharges the presupposition in question, although perhaps it should not be nominated as ‘subject’.

⁴² [Marx 1976] at 166; [Marx 1873] at 87.

⁴³ Ibid at 164; 86.

⁴⁴ [Marx 1873] at 86. Rendered by Fowkes as: “The equality of the kinds of human labour takes on a physical form in the equal objectivity of the products of labour as values” (at 164); and by Moore and Aveling as “The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values” ([Marx 1889] at 42); I would translate “The equality of human labours gains the factual form of the products of work being all equally values.”

products of labour, as social, natural-properties of these things, and thereby also the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, existing externally to them. Through this substitution (*Quidproquo*) products of work become commodities, sensuous supersensuous or social things⁴⁵

So, a substitution, a constitutive substitution, worked by the commodity form, exchanges the social character of that which produces value with the character of that which is produced, values. The substitution is located in perception. Thereby the products of labour become commodities: things of a strange kind. The social character of labour, that is its character as labouring for others becomes the social character of things, their being for each other. It would be like the mechanical optics of vision were one dealing with physical phenomena, but that is not the case. The commodity-form and the value-relation of products of labour within which it appears, has absolutely nothing to do with the physical character of those products of labour and their relations as things. (Here is that flash of the eye, the abstraction which ‘evidently’ characterises the exchange relation of commodities.) In its very duplicity, the commodity form plays up, plays tricks, so that “definite social relations between humans themselves . . . assumes here, for them, the bizarre (*phantasmagorisch*) form of a relation between things”.⁴⁶

In order therefore to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the product of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁴⁷

What Marx does here is name the phenomenon with a term coined in colonising Europe to characterise the superstitions of primitive peoples. I suppose he is using the analogy and name to tell against the conceit

⁴⁵ [Marx 1976] at 164–5; [Marx 1873] at 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

of enlightened bourgeois Europe, to hoist it on its own petard. But the hoist is the petard: a doctrine of historical progression of increasingly civilised religious beliefs which go hand in hand with economic, scientific and political progress. Marx adheres to and propagates this narrative, locating the promise of socialist revolution within it.

It is a move that fits that narrative and it is a narrative that was and is used to justify crime. Is it further imposed by the narrative? Here there are other questions that press. Why the shift to analogy? Whence the “therefore” that instructs the flight? Because the optical analogy founders on the absence of light being transmitted from one physical object to another? But this must be a feint! Or, if this bizarre appearance is the trammel of exchange-value as “merely appearance-*form*, not its own *content*”,⁴⁸ what or where is the, or is there a form that *is* its own content?

I take these questions up against a pretty obvious sense, not unrelated to the polemical intention mentioned, in which the analogy *is* imposed by the narrative. The shift to analogy is forced by Marx’s location of the substitution in perception and the metaphor of mirroring covering the function of the commodity form. Marx sees himself as confronted by that inversion (*Verdrehung*) in the forms of expression of value, as facing a breach of *sense* worked by these forms which he relates to an ‘inverted’ and mystical logic. The sight analogy fits the location (partially, but then it is only an analogy) but, given the claim that the abstraction involved works a complete divorce from the physicality of labour products, it is bound to fail. It functions only to instruct the flight to the misty realms of religion, to ground the ‘therefore’ and then on the supposition that there are just two possible realms where an analogy may be found: physical/neurological and spiritual. And metaphysical/logical?⁴⁹ The form that is its own content is Marx’s concept of value and that there might be questions of concept formation going to Aristotle’s approach to equality relations or indeed to a singular canon of classical logic consisting in some so called ineffable ‘laws of thought’ is excluded.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ [Marx 1879] at 215.

⁴⁹ I do not suggest this is the only other possibility. The psychoanalytic appropriation of fetishism is an obvious further candidate. My suggestion is directed by my interest and endeavour.

⁵⁰ “There is nothing in any of Marx’s writings to justify burdening him with the absurd doctrine that the law of non-contradiction is invalid” ([Callinicos 1983] at 54). Alas and that on many fronts!

It is not that all is lost from this point. The paragraph ends and the text shifts into a second phase, explaining what has been identified or at least named, by taking up, not the double form of the commodity but that of the labour embodied in commodities. It recurs back to the second section of the chapter, to the point which Marx has introduced into political economy. On the one hand the use-values of commodities come from diverse, heterogeneous concrete labour embodied in them. On the other, as values, their substance is the same: equal, or abstract human labour; labour reduced by a social process “that goes on behind the backs of the producers”⁵¹ to the expenditure of simple labour power.

The fetish attaching to commodities “arises from the peculiar (*eigentümlichen*) social character of the labour that produces them”. The significance of practices of exchange as that point at which producers labouring in private come into contact with each other is brought into relief. The social character of their private labours only appears within the context of that contact.

To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.⁵²

No illusions then? The bizarre appearance turns out, to use an Hegelian phrasing, to be the truth of social relations of production under conditions of private ownership of the means of production? I leave this run. Hegel is no political economist.

The text continues into a play of forms and processes of abstraction through which Marx conceptualises and represents how this state of affairs comes into being: exchange of commodities, its deepening and extension over a period of time to a point where useful things are produced for the purpose of exchange, and the effect of this “moment” in history on the labour of the individual producer. “From this moment on the labour of the individual producer acquires a twofold social character.” As an element in an originally natural but increasingly complex social division of labour, that labour must hold its place within this totality, by being concrete useful labour that satisfies definite social needs. But this it can

⁵¹ Ibid at 135; 59.

⁵² Ibid at 165–66; 87.

do, “only insofar as every particular kind of useful, private labour can be exchanged with i.e. counts as the equal of every other kind of useful private labour.”⁵³ Then on through the abstraction that constitutes the equality of completely different labours, over the role of social practices in the constitution of ideas⁵⁴ and back to a somewhat more determined representation of social processes going on behind the backs of intending individuals. The paragraph renders the transformation of the expanded to the universal form of value in less formal terms, renders the formulae of the previous section into a language of social theory. Its immediate destination is a critical point.

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true; by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do not know it, but they do it.⁵⁵

Intentionality and its incompleteness, the gap between actual and intended results of human action, between purposive human practices and their social effects enters the text.⁵⁶ It is the occasion for the social theorist or scientist to intervene and say what has happened.

Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; but rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, humans try to decipher the hieroglyphic,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ I am condensing an already dense text: “Equality of completely different labours, can only consist (*bestehen*) in an abstraction from their real inequality, in the reduction to the common characteristic which they have as the expenditure of human labour power, human labour in the abstract. The private producer’s brain reflects this twofold social character of his labour only in the forms which appear in practical intercourse, in the exchange of products” (ibid). “Gleichheit toto coelo verschiedener Arbeiten kann nur in einer Abstraktion von ihrer wirklichen Ungleichheit bestehn . . .”. It is not clear to me whether “toto coelo”, meaning fully or completely, qualifies ‘equality’ as in the Fowkes translation, or ‘different labours’ as I have rendered it. “Equality in the full sense” would indeed be identity.

⁵⁵ Ibid at 166; 88.

⁵⁶ Cf. [Markus 1986] at 6f, coupling this with objectivation (*Vergegenständlichung*) as basic to Marx’s idea of social theory.

to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much their social product as is their language. The belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity (*gegenständlichen Schein*) [objectual appearance] possessed by the social characteristics of labour.⁵⁷

What term, thing or object does have its description branded on its forehead? What doesn't have the character of hieroglyph? That must be a question. The 'therefore' however relates the thought here to the incomplete intentionality of human practices of production and exchange of commodities and the difficulties, after the event, after use-objects have become values, of deciphering what unbeknown to themselves they have done. Certainly, for Marx, a labour theory of value is indispensable to that task. As itself a product of definite social conditions, it tells of a progressively developing awareness. But theory does not change what it comprehends merely in comprehending it. The continuation of the paragraph now gets back to the specificity of value implied at the beginning. While the objectual appearance of social labour, like the chemical composition of the earth's atmosphere is not changed by its valid scientific analysis, it should not be forgotten that this analysis, unlike chemical analysis, is valid only for the particular social formation within which labour products become commodities. It is again a critical point. Marx is distinguishing between the universality of the valid statements of geometry, physics, chemistry etc. and the particularity to a given social formation of those of political economy.

For all that is problematic here, I wish to keep a focus on the objectual appearance that Marx is (and I am) struggling with. It is not the 'objectivity of illusion' (*Objektivität des Scheins*). It has the sense, as far as I can grasp it, of 'appearing to have the properties of a sensible object'. It is an appearance that goes through, happens on account of the *Quid-pro-quo*. The 'objectivity' of scientific knowledge on the other hand, has a different sense, one that refers back to the mode of scientific comprehension and is intended in 'the objectivity of illusion'. It has a connotation of

⁵⁷ [Marx 1976] at 167; [Marx 1873] at 88.

value or validity tied to its being (taken as) a form of knowledge of laws governing the realm of inquiry or, as I would prefer, of inescapability. The objectivity of the value of commodities plays between these senses: one does not know where to have it.

Following a paragraph covering a shift from quantitative to qualitative stabilisation of value in broadly socio-historical terms which, en route to locating the objectivity of the value of commodities in the socially necessary labour time for their production “asserting itself as a regulative law of nature”,⁵⁸ explicitly articulates Marx’s accusation of things controlling people rather than people controlling things, the text shifts again from the phenomenon and its explanation to representation of the phenomenon in political economy and theories of value.

Political economy, according to Marx, can avoid being misled in the theory of economic value even while the social conditions giving rise to the fetish prevail. Objects of utility become values within a social and historical process. But,

[r]eflection on the forms of human life, hence also the scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development. Reflection begins *post festum* and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand. The forms which stamp products as commodities and which are therefore the preliminary requirements for the circulation of commodities already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account not of their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but of their content.⁵⁹

It will shortly become clear that the plea that Marx makes in this passage for an historical approach as antidote to forgetting historical processes of becoming,⁶⁰ also observes the synchronic organisation of the categories of a science. The observation on forms stamping products of labour as commodities misrecognised as having “the fixed quality of natural forms of social life” is this forgetting. It anticipates the specific criticism of

⁵⁸ Ibid at 168; 89.

⁵⁹ Ibid at 168; 89–90.

⁶⁰ Cf. [Marx 1973] at 85; [Marx 1857–1858] at 7: “The whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of existing social relations lies in this forgetting.”

classical political economy, namely that it assumes capitalist production to be a natural, normal form of social organisation.

“The whole mystery of the form of value”, Marx has said, lies hidden in the simple form of value. But it is the finished (*fertige*) form, he now adds, the money form, which both gives commodities the character of values and does the work of concealment of the social character of private labour and the social relations between producers, “by making them appear as relations between things, instead of revealing them plainly”.⁶¹ And yet, as noted, a few pages back, in the context of his explanation of the phenomenon, Marx has said, “[t]o the producers, . . . the social relations between private labours *appear as what they are* (my emphasis).”

This is the question of illusion (or not) that I let run. I do not think that Marx is contradicting himself but there is slippage. The money-form is that which conceals and that *it* should have the capacity to reveal things plainly is counterfactually intended. What I think Marx wants to say is that the money-form *qua* universal form of value, constitutes the character of commodities as values and *merely* on account of gold or silver rather than coats or boots serving as the universal equivalent — a contingent matter without formal theoretical significance — conceals the social character of the labour and the social relations between producers. Marx draws here on his earlier analysis. He also assumes that the money-form bedazzles. The absurdity of saying that coats or boots are the universal incarnation of abstract labour, he claims, is self-evident. It is the dazzling money-form that conceals this absurdity. But there are several layers to ‘this absurdity’ and it is here that there is slippage. That this absurdity is no error of judgement on the part of those to whom it appears is the earlier point. The situation is one in which producers are ruled by their product. It is both actual and unreasonable. That it gives rise to appearance forms which substitute the properties of products of labour for the character of the labour process which produces them is also actual. These forms are themselves products of the relations of production that obtain. Is the substitution itself unreasonable? As the fetish character of commodities it is phenomenal: the earlier point. As *fetishism* it is pejoratively connoted as unreasonable, perverse. Something further is involved: a practice or representation that, at least, fails to grasp, is

⁶¹ [Marx 1976] at 169; [Marx 1873] at 89.

tricked by, falls prey to the dynamic of essence and appearance involved *and thus* constitutes a force against a possible, reasonable future.

That the material conditions of all this are alterable; that indeed a certain completion of a phase of historical development reached with the emergence of the universal form of value, both satisfies a condition for social revolution *and* obscures the possibility of revolution, are all now in issue. The normativity indicated stems from Marx's judgement that it is unreasonable that producers be ruled by their product. It gains its point from his conviction that this can be changed. It makes a demand on theory to distinguish what is actual from what is reasonable and thus to contribute to making what is reasonable, actual. An explanation is also emerging: political economy is caught, retarded in failure to see that the forms which constitute objects as commodities are relative to a particular social formation.

Such is the character attached to the categories of political economy. That is the generalisation to which Marx moves.⁶² Later, he will specify the question which the political economists failed to ask. My reservations here go to the money form as the "finished form" of the world of commodities. When is a form — a category, an institution, a shape of life — finished or completed? One can only say, it seems to me, *post festum*, with the experience of collapse, contradiction, sudden insight or unpredicted change in conditions that engenders uproar, crisis, new horizons or circumstances. Yet there is also a great insight. What is new to capitalist society is that the disguise of universality has fallen over the particularity of capitalist production relations themselves. So and even so, it is just with the emergence of universal forms of production relations that political economy comes onto the scene as a science. The categories or concepts constituting it as such become thinkable. They are true to ("socially valid and therefore objective (*objektiv*) thought-forms of")⁶³ the relations of production of this place and time: appropriate to the scientific analysis of capitalist but not all social formations. They appear as universal, unlimited in their applicability, but they are not.

The disguise of universality is only the more difficult to see through in the thought it enables. In order to dispel its "magic and necromancy" (*Zauber und Spuk*) Marx moves to a representation of four modes of pro-

⁶² Ibid, at 169; 90.

⁶³ Ibid.

duction.⁶⁴ In a following paragraph, within a narrative of progression from unfreedom to freedom and from a supposed portent of increasingly powerful means and enriching modes of production, Marx assigns various “religious reflections of the real world” to their corresponding social formations and concludes:

The shape of the social life-process, that is, of the material process of production, will only shed its mystical veil of mist, when, as the product of freely associated humans, it stands under their conscious and planned control. That, however, requires a material foundation of the society or a series of material conditions of existence, which are themselves, again, the naturally grown product of a long and tormented historical development.⁶⁵

Placed into the grammatical subject position, the shape (*die Gestalt*) of the material process of production is given a self-revealing potentiality, the actualisation or realisation of which is deferred to the activity of (some) humans, producers who will constitute themselves as revolutionary subjects. In an envisioned new sovereignty, the incomplete intentionality of human action should disappear from the realm of necessity.

The text moves back at this point to political economy and the question that separates it from Marx’s critique. Political economy, he writes,

has uncovered the content concealed in these forms [of value and its magnitude]. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to social formations in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists’ bourgeois consciousness to be as much a

⁶⁴ Crusonade, feudal, communal peasant and communist. They have distinctive intended essences: the classical liberal individualism of the Crusonade narrative, the hierarchy of feudal relations of personal dependence, the patriarchy of the peasant family and the transparent relations of production and distribution in an imagined “association (*Verein*) of free humans, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force” (ibid at 171; 92).

⁶⁵ Ibid at 173; 94.

self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labour itself.⁶⁶

Marx's question is a demand on theory to grasp content revealed and concealed in expressions. What stands before or behind it is the way in which Marx has sought to meet that demand in the preceding body of the chapter. What is presented is an answer to the question of why political economy, even at its best, has *not* asked Marx's question. No doubt this is a move that is characteristic of critique. Nor should it be forgotten that, although the analysis of the discourse of political economy that might support Marx's contention is not before the reader, Marx has been working the archives of political economy for over twenty years: a labour that may well be described as a labour of love. Three long footnotes appended to the paragraph may serve as such a reminder. Perhaps a residing unease with this answer should be put to the limitations of critique. Or perhaps it is the category or notion within which it is formulated, namely self-evident, nature-imposed necessity that provokes dissent.

Withal, finally, remarkably, in still another attempt to communicate his idea, Marx has commodities re-take the stage to speak their own secret. They take the stage as self-aware and articulate subjects, gaily poking fun at the economists they mislead. Not use-values but exchange values are what they are about, how they relate to each other, what they intend.

Our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as things (*Dingen*). What belongs to us as things however is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.⁶⁷

4. Religion, Science, Ideology

It may not seem like much of a secret. It may, for those for whom there is no stuff and matter only only signs and symbols, tell only of a Marx caught in his own illusion. The secret concerns things and anything, everything is or can be taken as a 'thing'.⁶⁸ But then the particular, peculiar thingness of commodities is what is at stake. *That* is what is constituted by the

⁶⁶ Ibid at 174–5; 94–5.

⁶⁷ Ibid at 176–7; 97.

⁶⁸ Cp. [Nancy 1993] at 167–88.

Quidproquo even as commodities as use-values that are bearers of value are products of humans labouring in bourgeois society.

What commodities, these sensuous-supersensuous or social things, would say of themselves, were it the case that they had that other peculiarly social characteristic of humans, namely language, is what Marx has them say. His critique is of political economy, but the metaphysical and theological subtleties of the thing-ness of commodities concern substance and subject in a thinking that is also a thinking of necessity and freedom.

“[E]verything turns on grasping the True not only as *Substance* but also as *Subject*”, Hegel wrote in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁶⁹ For Marx, substance become subject is ensouled commodities. Such a portrayal works a *reductio ad absurdum* of Hegel’s standpoint, but not as an argument that dangles in mid-air. Ensouled commodities speaking out their own character or identity is the inscenation of an idea it is written against and in that sense could not have been written without.

It is by all means a remarkable scene and its continuation, the invitation to compare what commodities would say of themselves with what the economists cited as “speaking out of the soul of the commodity” say of them, is remarkably ambiguous, indeed paradoxical.

Value (exchange value) is a property of things, riches (use-value) of man. Value, in this sense, necessarily implies exchanges, riches do not.

And:

Riches (use-value) are the attribute of man, value an attribute of commodities. A man or a community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable A pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or diamond.⁷⁰

The scene plays out within the spell of the fetish (or as a play within a play) and it does give rise to the suspicion, which Derrida voices, that

⁶⁹ [Hegel 1977] at 9–10; [Hegel 1807] at 22.

⁷⁰ [Marx 1976] at 177; [Marx 1873] at 97. The economists cited reject Ricardo’s theory of value. They are particular cases, for Marx, of getting things wrong as regards value, use-value and exchange value. Ricardo’s followers, Marx notes, are unable to make a convincing response to the criticism of him made by the (unnamed) author first cited and S. Bailey (the author of the second citation) for the familiar reason that they do not find in Ricardo’s work any elucidation of the internal connection between value and the form of value, or exchange value (ibid n.38; n.36).

Marx puts words into the mouths of commodities only then to claim that the economist naively reproduces this fictive speech.⁷¹ I am not clear what Derrida is aiming at, but he seems to by-pass just that which I wish to dwell on: the problematic ‘objectivity’ of fetish phenomena. What these commodities say is that use-value “does not belong to us as things” (*Er kommt uns nicht als Dingen zu*) and the thing-ness of commodities is just that which their form, their double character both constitutes and dissembles. That this thing-ness, this ‘objectivity’ is *not* the ‘objectivity’ of value, that it plays between two senses of ‘objectivity’ and in this mischievous play, plays up with these senses is the point. The hyperbole of their speech, the extravagance of linen in association with a coat revealing “its thoughts in language with which it alone is familiar” positions Marx, outside the ‘world of commodities’, as de-cipherer of a code written by sensuous, practical human activity in the space of its own incomplete intentionality. That it, this code, this speech, is thus written; that it is not of Marx’s sole authoring; that there is an ‘objectivity’ in all this which Marx wants to get at and bind into a transformable present is the point I wish to hold on to. It is *an* objectivity of illusion; an instantiation of such objectivity in the social realm. It is not *the* objectivity of illusion in the sense it which Hegel takes such objectivity, product of contradictions existing in *all* ideas, concepts, and categories, as a *logos*, a principle of intelligibility from which a science of logic becomes possible.⁷²

The claim that the code is not, trivially, of Marx’s sole authoring is, in one dimension, the same implausible claim that Hegel makes for his derivation of the categories of metaphysics. It supposes a method that is internal to the task in hand which is to trace a contradiction driven *and constitutive/productive* dynamic, and that within an epistemology (or counter-epistemology)⁷³ which admits subject-object interaction in the production of knowledge. *Capital* is written from a standpoint that is for the working class, the class which, in Marx’s political thought, is the ‘subject of history’. These first chapters of *Capital* however have the

⁷¹ Cp. [Derrida 1994] at 157f.

⁷² That totalisation in Hegel’s case, undermining as it does, literal readings of his absolute idea, holds his logic open; makes his logical foundation, unlike Kant’s, a foundation that does not justify and so attempt to conserve, existing knowledge that is presumed complete and perfect. Cf. [Nancy 2002] esp. at 19f and 66f.

⁷³ For a sketch of the epistemological dimension of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* ‘standpoint of absolute knowing’ and its relation to his *Logic* see [Kerruish 2006] at 33.

significant similarity to Hegel's *Logic* of being subjectless in *that* sense of subject. In making the commodity the subject of his chapter, Marx here no less than Hegel there, is engaged with the agency of forms in knowing and knowledge: logical forms for Hegel; forms that have emerged as the conventionally established categories of classical political economy (value, use-value, exchange-value) for Marx. And just as Hegel's *Logic* is intended to be an organon or tool for the production of objective insights, Marx's theory of value is intended as a tool of economic analysis.⁷⁴ In both cases then the task at hand is practical-theoretical, reliant on a method (as well as presupposing an epistemic standpoint), although not justified by it.⁷⁵

In reading Hegel's Idea as a demiurgos outside the system Marx seems not to recognise this dimension in Hegel's approach, even as his own approach, relative to the different contexts of the two endeavours and a corresponding difference in methods employed, has that same dimension. Given foundational claims made in both enterprises, this perhaps gives the sense of inversion which Marx intends. That is to say, for Marx, Hegel's logical foundation is subject to *his*, Marx's foundational claim: that *all* forms of human consciousness, science, art, philosophy, law, religion are founded on the mode of production of material life. Such totalisations or universal quantifications are notoriously tricky. But *in principle* Marx's foundational claim is no less open than Hegel's (minus of course the construal of the absolute idea as a demiurgos). 'In principle': that is if Marx, unlike his Marxist followers, is *not* read as excluding his own thought from the range of applicability of his foundational thesis. That is why, at the outset, I suggested that the nineteenth century paradigm of science that Marx is thinking within, has only so much force. It is then, rather the suspicion of something like a *tertium non datur* being applied to a question of material or ideal foundations that is hard to dispel. The satire of ensouled commodities, read as a *reductio*, is a rejection of Hegel's logical dialectic. To that extent I agree with Althusser's arguments for a radical break between Marx and Hegel.⁷⁶ It takes shape here, as Marx makes his own abstract beginning with a logic of capital, and indeed with

⁷⁴ Cf. [Burkitt 1984] at 54f.

⁷⁵ Cf. [Rose 1981] at 24f for an account of neo-Kantian influences in the emergence of Marxist sociology; on the role of method in Hegel's *Logic* on which however I do not follow her, see *ibid* at 201.

⁷⁶ I am unconvinced by Althusser's substitution of Spinoza for Hegel as Marx's "only direct ancestor" ([Althusser and Balibar 1970] at 102). Whether one is better off

the insistence that the commodity is ‘first of all’ to be taken as an external, physical object, although Marx knows well that a ‘cell-form’ is a concept reached by abstraction.

I want then to lead that break back into different ideas of abstraction or concept formation. From early to late Marx rejects Hegel’s *substantivierte Ausageform*, the abstraction or objectification whereby a predicate is turned into a substantive which can then take the place of a grammatical subject.⁷⁷ It is Hegel’s way of bracketing out ‘the nature of things’ and constructing a purely logical realm, within which thought confronts only itself.⁷⁸ Set firmly against this move, Marx refuses a distinction between logical and historical concepts. It is a rejection of the value or validity in scientific discourse of the artificed construction of a realm of pure thought. The very abstract beginning of *Capital* with its consideration of the agency of forms is, as a logic, the logic of a discourse (political economy) which is itself, for Marx, the product of historically changing social relations of production. Yet formal logic is also in play, willy nilly, whatever Marx thought of it as a science; whether he saw his rejection of Hegel’s logic as an affirmation of the classical paradigm or whether he thought formal logic largely irrelevant to his science. It is in play, regulating reasoning and, at least by default, the ‘it’ is classical logic with its authorisations and permissions regarding assumptions and its incontrovertible laws of thought. The dynamical dimension of Marx’s thought comes from his standpoint of viewing the economic formation of

with a Spinozistic Marx rather than an Hegelian Marx when it comes to the ethics and politics of Marxism is not my question.

⁷⁷ He actually uses this device in the section on commodity fetishism, where following the analogy with religion, the text moves into explanatory mode. The following very literal translation which does not follow the verb change in the English translation from “acts practically” to “appears in practice” brings it out. “Only within their exchange, [do] the products of work receive a socially equal objectivity with regard to value which is separated from their perceptibly different objectivity with regard to use. *This splitting of the product of work into a useful thing and a value-thing only comes to act practically (betätigt sich nur praktisch)* when exchange has already attained sufficient extension and importance, so that useful things are produced for exchange, [and] the value-character of the things itself therefore already comes into consideration with their production” (my emphasis; [Marx 1873] at 87; cp. [Marx 1976] at 166). I have puzzled about that but, unable to determine whether it is a conscious play or a standard use of the German language of the times, have had to let it be.

⁷⁸ See further [Kerruish 2006] at 35.

society as a process of natural history and that in turn is embedded in his narrative. There is then nothing to liberate the concepts of necessity and freedom from the cultural narrative Marx thinks within, nothing *except* Marx's very own analytic endeavour and it is just this that gives out when he takes flight to the misty realm of religion.

One will lose Marx's whole analytic endeavour with its 'contradiction' between private production and social exchange together with the modal shift from analysis of what the double form of the commodity is to what it does to the disaster of the analogy with religion and its narrative unless these *formal* logical considerations are aired.⁷⁹ They must however be complemented by asking what the analytic endeavour gives out *to* if one is not merely to shift the application of a dubious use of *tertium non datur* from ontology to formal logic. It cannot be, Marx has said, in statement or affirmation of his presupposition, natural properties of commodities that constitute their value. It cannot be, I would say, that the relation between classical and non-classical logics is determined by a classical logical principle; not at least if one is attempting to reason otherwise.⁸⁰ Certainly, it is here, on a question of formal logic that I revise Marx. It seems to me that he does not come to this question because he is barred from it by his break with Hegel. That is the sense in which I have said that Marx *cannot* accept thought itself as being at odds with itself. It is, I think, equally clear that it is to the political and (anti-)religious normativity of his thought, that the analytic endeavour gives out.

As I have said, all is not lost thereby so far as Marx's scientific work is concerned. The costs will lie elsewhere. The text shifts to explanation, keeping its grip on the actuality of the *Quidproquo*, holding the passionate belief in the unreasonableness of this actuality in the keeping of saying how and why it comes to this actuality. I do not think Marx errs in leading that back into social practices of exchange in political economies with the venerable institution of private ownership of the means of production.

⁷⁹ The notion of 'formal logical' used here differs from that cognate to the 'formal logic' which Hegel considered a heap of dead bones. *That* logic is pretty much dead and gone though its place as sanctified canon of reason is held today by first order, classical logic. Taught in standard introductions to logic as the logic of 'correct inference', often enough to enhance or as a course in 'critical thinking' it seems to me to be not the least of academic institutions' contribution to stifling both interest in and critical thinking about formal logic.

⁸⁰ For considerations going to this claim see [Kerruish and Petersen 2006] at 79f.

I think rather that a justified focus of critique based on the perception of structural tension between social being as being for others and private production as production in isolation from other producers has been made hostage to a shoddy analogy and a prejudiced naming. That this takes place on the basis of an historical narrative Marx shares, even inherits from Hegel is less ironic than bitter. I shall come back to that and to the thinking of freedom and necessity associated with it very shortly. I want first to add a few words in defence of my claim that all is not lost thereby.

Marx would not be Marx had he not rejected Hegel's logical dialectic and seen in the expressions of exchange-value a similarly mystified expression. The fetish character of the commodity as an instantiation of the objectivity of illusion in the social realm would not have been written up. The insight of the form of universality falling over production relations themselves and in enabling a science also concealing its limitations would not have been articulated. The engagement with the logic of a discourse⁸¹ (or system, situation, field, text, institution) which is Marx's engagement in these early chapters of *Capital* would be lacking.

There is a gap between an imagined or constructed realm of pure thought and the social realm which Marx presupposes. No doubt that gap is as imaginary or as artficed as the realm of pure thought itself and some say that common sense and experimental science get along perfectly well without burdening themselves with such a realm and the gap it opens. Marx to my mind is not of this persuasion and for that reason a most enigmatic materialist. He imagines a new sovereignty and an infinite freedom based on human mastery of nature, on fully rational control of the realm of necessity.⁸² I have wondered at that, wondered how on earth Marx could have imagined that humans might escape the incomplete intentionality of their actions, most of all as regards their own needs and desires. But any answer to that question which would not, foolishly, treat Marx as a fool, would need to take up the subjective side

⁸¹ The usage communicates a theoretical sense of what must or does hold or happen in the designated location on account of the nature or structure of that location. It takes in the fetish-character of the commodity as an objective, in the sense of necessary phenomenon of capitalist social relations consistently with the play between the thing-sense and law-sense of 'objectivity' that Marx is confronting.

⁸² Sketched in the cited passage from the section on commodity fetishism, this is somewhat expanded towards the end of volume III of *Capital* ([Marx 1971] at 818f; [Marx 1894] at 826f.

of an interpenetrated subjective–objective structure of human knowing and being. I have taken up the side of objectivity: an objectivity that plays between that said to be founded on laws of one type and another and an objectivity that is tied to external objects that are what they are independent of human intercourse with them in thinking and knowing.

That is evidently one-sided and partial. Its motivation, and my own suspension of the political dimensions of Marx's thought is itself political. The narrative that Marx brings to the social realm is the more easily denounced than displaced and I see no point adding more denunciations in the face of that. I rather follow Marx (against Marx) in saying that this narrative and the consciousness it speaks out is not sheer, mere fiction without its own conditions of production and reproduction in social relations and practices. And further and still in a way, following Marx: what it does, its justificatory function as applied to the crimes of colonialism is inseparable from their commission and repetition. Evidently I reject the analogy with religion. As fitting the narrative it is implicated in it. As imposed by the narrative on Marx's formal conceptualisation of the social realm, it removes the sense of fetish phenomena from the double character of the commodity. But it is not that I do not have my own normative point. I am hoping to persuade my reader that, in addition to counter-narratives, critiques and deconstructive arguments, plays and performances, theory needs to pursue logical/metaphysical issues against the justificatory function of a narrative that does not go away. Science, a discourse or form of knowing that gets the name of objective knowledge because it is a powerful instrument of change is part of that hope. A science of logic Hegelian in spirit, mathematical in reasoning and tools, that investigates the very notion of 'objectivity' that, to my mind, imbues and redeems the idea of the fetish character of the commodity, opens a realm of investigation that takes the place of Marx's analogy.

In sum: my argument is that in rejecting Hegel's logical dialectic, Marx wittingly/unwittingly disarms himself in the face of his own apprehension of that very excess of thought that haunts logics of the understanding. He disarms himself of the question Hegel asked, however obscurely, of those laws of thought that were once thought, by logicians, philosophers and mathematicians alike to be unquestionable. It rests on the broader contention that the substitution or *Quidproquo* that Marx names fetishism is a particular instance of a dialectic of form and content

which shows up in the antinomies, incompleteness and undecidability results of twentieth century higher order logic and set theory. The perfectly innocent thing — sign, number, word, table — used daily without ever giving anybody any trouble, is in no way innocent. It escapes the control of ordinary use and ordinary language, defies conventions, ignores bans, plays up, plays havoc, not with common sense, that withstands such inordinacy, but with the unquestionability of ‘laws of thought’. It has another character, a *Doppelgänger*. It is itself and it stands for something else. It is used to calculate and to code. It revels in ambiguity. It is the solid thing at which we take our meals and it encodes distinctions of consumption and taste. One can celebrate and make fine plays of all this, particularly in the realm of the symbolic. One can insist on control and try banning use–mention and other ‘confusions’. One can take refuge in what some seem to think is the earthly saviour of social theory, common sense. Or, and here one can, in principle, be with both Marx and Hegel, seek to fashion from it a tool, a theory or a logic as a tool of objective insights.

How would that look as concerns legal theory? I have no programmatic answer to this question. I can only say that I would revise Marx’s thesis to contend that fetish phenomena are actual and reasonable/unreasonable, deferring its equivocation into law’s claim to authoritative determinations of right, into a question of law’s reasonableness, and developing that to an idea of the wrong of law.

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