

Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*

'Vulgar economy . . . everywhere sticks to appearances in opposition to the law which regulates and explains them. In opposition to Spinoza, it believes that "ignorance is a sufficient reason" ' (I, 307).¹ ' . . . Vulgar economy feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations . . . these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it' (III, 797). ' . . . The philistine's and vulgar economist's *way of looking at things* stems . . . from the fact that it is only the direct *form of manifestation* of relations that is reflected in their brains and not their *inner connection*' (Marx to Engels, 27/6/1867). 'Once for all I may here state, that by classical Political Economy, I understand that economy which, since the time of W. Petty, has investigated the real relations of production in bourgeois society, in contradistinction to vulgar economy, which deals with appearances only' (I, 81). 'It is the great merit of classical economy to have destroyed this false appearance and illusion . . . this personification of things and conversion of production relations into entities, this religion of everyday life . . . nevertheless even the best

spokesmen of classical economy remain more or less in the grip of the world of illusion which their criticism had dissolved, as cannot be otherwise from a bourgeois standpoint, and thus they all fall more or less into inconsistencies, half-truths and unsolved contradictions' (III, 809).

In this manner does Marx, on many occasions, specify the distance separating vulgar economy from classical political economy, and *a fortiori* from his own critique of the latter, providing us at the same time with a conception of the minimum *necessary* condition to be satisfied by any work aspiring to scientific status: namely, that it uncovers the reality behind the appearance which conceals it. The intention of this article is to deal with a group of problems (in particular, the problem of fetishism) related to Marx's formulations of this requirement and to the systematic recurrence of its appropriate terminology—appearance/essence, form/content, illusion/reality, phenomena/hidden substratum, form of manifestation/inner connection, etc. It should, however, be made clear at the outset that scarcely anything is said about the development of Marx's views on these questions, hence about the relation between the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 and *Capital*; and, about the relationship between Hegel and Marx, nothing at all. Thus the process of Marx's intellectual formation and development is set to one side, and these problems are considered only as they emerge in *Capital* itself, at the interior of what is a more or less finished, more or less coherent structure of thought.

The theoretical foundation of *Capital*

If we begin, then, with what I have called the minimum necessary condition of Marx's science, this methodological requirement to which he assigns an exceptional importance, the first question which arises is as follows: what is its theoretical foundation? What establishes its necessity? At all events, it is hardly an arbitrary construction on Marx's part. The text of *Capital* provides us with two kinds of answer. In one, it is revealed as the common requirement of *any* science.

'... a scientific analysis of competition is not possible before we have a conception of the inner nature of capital, just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are not intelligible to any but him, who is acquainted with their real motions, motions which are not directly perceptible by the senses' (I, 316).

'That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy' (I, 537).

'... all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (III, 797).

In such passages Marx presents the conceptual distinction between

¹ References of *Capital* give the volume number (Roman) and the page number (Arabic) of the edition published by Lawrence and Wishart, London 1961–2. The letters of Marx and Engels can be found in the *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow n.d.).

appearance and reality as a form of *scientificity as such*, by notifying us that the method he is applying in political economy is simply a general requirement for arriving at valid knowledge, one which he has taken over from the other sciences where it has long been established. Taken on its own, this answer is not entirely satisfactory. It makes of Marx's primary methodological injunction—to shatter the obviousness of immediate appearances — an abstract procedural rule which must form part of the equipment of every science, regardless of the content of that science, of the nature of its object of study. Taken on its own, this answer does not yet specify why it is appropriate to extend the methods of astronomy to the subject matter of political economy. For this reason we put it in parenthesis for the moment, though it should be borne in mind since it will be reconsidered at a later stage of the argument.

We proceed to Marx's second answer which is of a different order altogether from the first. This answer is, of course, contained in the doctrine of fetishism. For the latter specifies those properties of Marx's object of study itself which imperiously *demand* that appearances be demolished if reality is to be correctly grasped. It analyses the mechanisms by which capitalist society necessarily appears to its agents as something other than it really is. The notion of fetishism raises quite complex problems, which will be developed presently, but even now it should be clear that we have in this second answer a theoretical foundation for the distinction, essence/appearance, and its variations, which was lacking in the first. The relation between methodological injunction and object of study is no longer one of externality, as is the case with an abstract rule applicable to any content whatsoever. It is, rather, what may be termed a *relation of adequacy* between object and method, the character of the latter being determined by the structure of the former. It is because there exists, at the interior of capitalist society, a kind of internal rupture between the social relations which obtain and the manner in which they are experienced, that the scientist of that society is confronted with the necessity of constructing reality against appearances. Thus, this necessity can no longer be regarded as an arbitrary importation into Marx's own theoretical equipment or something he merely extracted from other pre-existing sciences. And the passages quoted at the beginning of this paper are seen to lead, by a short route, to the heart of the notion of fetishism.

It is enough to consult any standard commentary on Marx to see that this notion is not free from ambiguity or confusion, and, to some extent, this is also true of Marx's own exposition in the first chapter of *Capital*. It seems necessary, therefore, to adopt an analytic procedure, in an attempt to isolate different aspects of the concept and to examine them separately, even if such a procedure runs the risk of fragmenting what Marx conceived to be a unified phenomenon. For, if it enables us to clarify the aspects, taken separately, the chances of understanding their relations to one another, that is to say, of reconstituting them as a whole, are thereby enhanced. An initial distinction, one which is clear enough, between two aspects of fetishism is provided by the text of *Capital* itself: '... a definite social relation between men ... assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (I, 72).

'... their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them' (I, 75).

In capitalist society the phenomenon of fetishism imposes itself on men (a) as mystification and (b) as domination. Clearly the two aspects are intimately related, inasmuch as men are in no position to control, rather than submit to, social relations which they do not correctly understand. And that they are so related is reflected in subsequent literature on the subject where they are normally run together. Thus Garaudy writes: 'The relations between men take on the appearance of relations between objects . . . Things rule the men who have created them.' And Sweezy: '... the real character of the relations among the producers themselves is both distorted and obscured from view . . . the world of commodities has, so to speak, achieved its independence and subjected the producers to its sway.'² However, for the reasons stated, I intend as far as possible to maintain the distinction, and to treat mystification and domination separately, taking the latter first although the former is more directly pertinent to the problem of appearance and reality and also more problematic. No discussion of fetishism can ignore this feature of domination altogether, and it may perhaps be appropriate to clear it out of the way.

The role of Alienation in Capital

What we have to deal with here is not domination in general but an historically specific form of domination. It differs, for example, from the relations of 'personal dependence' which Marx identifies as characteristic of the European middle ages (I, 77), and this for two reasons: whereas there the domination is undisguised, under capitalism it is concealed; secondly, and more to the point here, it is precisely an *impersonal* kind of domination exercised by the totality of economic relations over *all* the agents of capitalist society, embracing also the capitalist whose overriding interest is the extraction of as much surplus labour as possible from the worker. He too cannot be held 'responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains' (I, 10; Preface to the First German Edition). It is unnecessary to rehearse all the aspects of this impersonal domination—the independence of the production process vis-à-vis the producers, the past labour of the worker confronting him as a hostile power in the shape of capital, the instruments of labour employing the worker rather than vice versa, the drudgery and stupefaction of work, and so on. All these are comprised by the concept of alienation. However, in *Capital* this is a historical concept of alienation. Its social and historical premises are precisely economic relations based on the production and exchange of commodities.

This is brought out clearly in the following passages: 'The owners of commodities . . . find out, that the same division of labour that turns

² Roger Garaudy, *Karl Marx: the Evolution of his Thought*, London 1967, p. 125; Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, London 1946, p. 36. Cf. also Georg Lukács, *Histoire et Conscience de Classe*, Paris 1960, pp. 110–13 and Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, London 1933, p. 162.

them into independent private producers, also frees the social process of production and the relations of the individual producers to each other within that process, from all dependence on the will of those producers, and that the seeming mutual independence of the individuals is supplemented by a system of general and mutual dependence through or by means of the products' (I, 107-8).

Political Economy 'has never once asked the question why labour is represented by the value of its product and labour-time by the magnitude of that value. These formulae, which bear it stamped upon them in unmistakable letters that they belong to a state of society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him, such formulae appear to the bourgeois intellect to be as much a self-evident necessity imposed by Nature as productive labour itself' (I, 80-1).

Here, the roots of the phenomena grouped under the term alienation, are located in specific social relations, and not in the fact that there is an ideal essence of man, his 'species-being', which has been negated or denied. And this is the difference that separates *Capital* from certain passages in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*,³ even though there, too, Marx deals with such features of capitalist society as the domination of the worker by his product and the stultifying character of his work.⁴ In place of a concept of alienation founded on an essentialist anthropology, we have one tied to the historical specificity of forms of domination.

To this extent, those discussions of fetishism which simply take for granted the complete unity between the *Manuscripts* and *Capital*,⁵ are of dubious value, conflating as they do two concepts of different theoretical status. And when Lukács, in his discussion of fetishism, speaks of one-sided specialization 'violating the human essence of man' (*op. cit.*, p. 128), he is guilty of the same conflation. On the other hand, Althusser has proposed a reading of fetishism in which, of the two aspects that have been distinguished, namely, mystification and domination, only the former is treated. The notion of men being dominated by their own products has vanished (almost) without trace. Such an interpretation demands, of course, that the concept of fetishism be regarded as entirely unrelated to, and independent of, that of alienation,⁶ and the latter is accordingly dismissed as 'ideological' and 'pre-Marxist'.⁷

In this reading Althusser is guilty, in the first place, of violating the text of *Capital*, as the following passages make clear: '... the character (*Gestalt*) of independence and estrangement (*entfremdet*) which the capitalist mode of production as a whole gives to the instruments of

³ T. B. Bottomore (ed.), *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, London 1963, pp. 126-28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-25.

⁵ Eg. Garaudy *op. cit.*, pp. 52-63 and 124-27.

⁶ J.-C. Forquin, 'Lecture d'Althusser' in *Dialectique Marxiste et Pensée Structurale*, special number of *Les Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes Socialistes*, 76-81, February-May 1968, p. 27.

⁷ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London 1969, p. 239.

labour and to the product, as against the workman, is developed by means of machinery into a thorough antagonism' (I, 432).

'Since, before entering on the process, his own labour has already been alienated (*entfremdet*) from himself by the sale of his labour-power, has been appropriated by the capitalist and incorporated with capital, it must, during the process, be realised in a product that does not belong to him (*in fremdem Produkt*)' (I, 570–71).

'Capital comes more and more to the fore as a social power, whose agent is the capitalist. This social power no longer stands in any possible relation to that which the labour of a single individual can create. It becomes an alienated (*entfremdete*), independent social power, which stands opposed to society as an object, and as an object that is the capitalist's source of power' (III, 259).

And even were the term 'alienation' altogether absent, there are enough passages where the *concept*, and all the phenomena it embraces, are presented, to invalidate Althusser's reading of *Capital* on this point.⁸

However, it is not only a question of the validity of the interpretation of Marx. There are serious theoretical consequences as well. For in Althusser the concept of alienation, as that form of domination engendered by capitalist relations of production, is replaced—and here is its surviving trace—by the notion of men as the mere functionaries, or bearers (*Träger*), of the relations of production which determine their places and their functions.⁹ What Marx regards as a feature specific to *capitalist* relations of production, Althusser articulates as a *general* proposition of historical materialism. Thus de-historicizing the concept of alienation in a manner quite strange for a Marxist author (for how is this different from the fault of the classical political economists who regard commodity production as eternal?) he makes it impossible to comprehend, from his perspective, those passages in which Marx anticipates a future social formation where, precisely, men will control their relations of production, rather than be controlled by them, where they will, therefore, cease to be mere functionaries and bearers. We shall see later on that Althusser commits an exactly parallel error in relation to the other aspect of fetishism, mystification. For the moment it is sufficient to observe that, in his legitimate anxiety to be done with the anthropological concept of alienation, he throws out the historical concept as well, de-historicizing it in a 'new' way.

The reality of Value Relations

Returning now to the problem of essence/appearance and the mystificatory aspect of fetishism, it will be well to make a secondary distinc-

⁸ For example I: 112, 310, 360–61, 422–23, 645. There is an excellent discussion of the relation between the *Manuscripts* and *Capital* in Ernest Mandel, *La Formation de la Pensée Economique de Karl Marx*, Paris 1967, pp. 151–79.

⁹ 'The Object of Capital', in *Reading Capital* (London 1970), p. 180.

tion: between (a) those appearances, or forms of manifestation, in which social relations present themselves and which are not mystificatory or false *as such*, inasmuch as they do correspond to an objective reality; they become mystified only when regarded as products of nature or of the subjective intentions of men; and (b) those appearances, or forms of manifestation, which are quite simply false, illusions in the full sense, corresponding to no objective reality. This distinction governs what follows. (Unless, therefore, it is made explicit, the term 'appearance' should not be taken to mean 'mere, i.e. false, appearance'. The same goes for the word 'form'.) And it is a helpful one to the extent that it enables one to avoid the kind of confusion into which many accounts of fetishism fall, and of which the following passage by Karl Korsch is an example: 'The value relations appearing in the exchange of the products of labour as "commodities" are essentially not relations between things, but merely an imaginary expression of an underlying social relation between the human beings who co-operate in their production. Bourgeois society is just that particular form of the social life of man in which the most basic relations established between human beings in the social production of their lives become known to them only after the event, and even then only in the reversed form of relations between things. By depending in their conscious actions upon such imaginary concepts, the members of modern "civilized" society are really, like the savage by his fetish, controlled by the work of their hands.'¹⁰

While there is much here that is unobjectionable (e.g. value relations as the product of social relations, men dominated by their own creations), it is incorrect to describe value relations as imaginary. As I shall try to show, Marx does not do so. Such a description is dangerously close, though Korsch manages to keep his distance, to a purely subjectivist explanation of fetishism, of the kind given by Berger and Pullberg when, in an article on the sociology of knowledge, they formulate the following stupefying definition: '... alienation is the process by which man forgets that the world he lives in has been produced by himself.'¹¹ What they themselves 'forget' is that, if forgetfulness were all that was involved, a reminder should be sufficient to deal with the constituent problems of alienation.

How is it then with Marx? What is in question at the moment are the following forms of manifestation: that labour is represented by the value of its product, labour-time by the magnitude of that value, and social relations by the value relations between commodities. For Marx, neither values nor value relations are imaginary. They are not illusory appearances, but *realities*. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly. It represents a first step towards understanding what is involved in fetishism. Thus he writes: '... the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter,

¹⁰ Karl Korsch: *Karl Marx* (New York 1963), p. 131.

¹¹ P. Berger and S. Pullberg: 'Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness', *New Left Review* 35, January–February 1966, p. 61.

therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the next appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as *what they really are*, material relations between persons and social relations between things' (I, 73. My emphasis).

It is in the light of this statement that the ambiguous footnote which occurs shortly afterwards should be interpreted: 'When, therefore, Galiani says: Value is a relation between persons . . . he ought to have added: a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things' (I, 74).

This means, not that a relation between persons takes on the illusory appearance of a relation between things, but that where commodity production prevails, relations between persons really do take the form of relations between things. This is the specific form of capitalist social relations; other societies, both pre- and post-capitalist, are characterized by social relations of a different form. A moment's consideration of the defining relations of capitalist society—capitalist/worker, producer-of-/consumer-of-commodities—is enough to verify this. For the capitalist, the worker exists only as labour-power, for the worker, the capitalist only as capital. For the consumer, the producer is commodities, and for the producer the consumer is money. Althusser is therefore correct to insist that the social relations of production are not, and are not reducible to, simple relations between men.¹² And the reply of one of his critics—that they are, but mediated by things¹³ is not so much a counter-statement as a restatement of the same thing. It should, however, be borne in mind that the objects, namely commodities, the value relations between which are the form taken by capitalist social relations, are social and not natural objects.

It is just because these value relations are neither imaginary nor illusory but real, that Marx is able to make the following judgement: 'The categories of bourgeois economy . . . are forms of thought expressing *with social validity* the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities' (I, 76. My emphasis).

At the same time Marx describes these forms of thought as absurd. But what kind of absurdity is it? 'When I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen, because it is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots compare those articles with linen, or, what is the same thing, with gold or silver, as the universal equivalent, they express the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society in the same absurd form' (I, 76).

It is the absurdity not of an illusion, but of reality itself, and to this extent it is an absurdity which is true.

¹² 'The Object of Capital', op. cit., p. 174.

¹³ S. Pullberg: 'Notes pour une lecture anthropologique de Marx' in *Dialectique Marxiste et Pensée Structurale*, op. cit., p. 145.

The Social Reality behind Fetishized Relationships

Having insisted on the *reality* of value, and of the objective form taken on by capitalist social relations, the form, that is to say, of a relation between objects, we further specify them by emphasizing that they are *social* realities. This determination Marx himself makes quite clear: 'If . . . we bear in mind that the value of commodities has a purely social reality, and that they acquire this reality only in so far as they are expressions or embodiments of one identical social substance, viz., human labour, it follows as a matter of course, that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity' (I, 47).

' . . . the coat, in the expression of value of the linen, represents a non-natural property of both, something purely social, namely, their value' (I, 57).

Further, by a third specification, it is necessary to recognize value and the objective form of social relations as *historically specific* social realities, and not just social realities in general. From this, three important conclusions are to be derived.

1. The distinctions, form/content, appearance/essence, retain their significance for the analysis and explanation of these realities, but on condition that the first term of each opposition is not taken to be synonymous with illusion. Because the forms taken by capitalist social relations, their modes of appearance, are historically specific ones, they are puzzling forms, they contain a secret. The reasons why social relations should take such forms, rather than others, are not self-evident. It requires a work of analysis to discover them, to disclose the secret, and, in doing this, it reveals the contents of these forms and the essence of these appearances. At the same time, the content explains the form, and the essence the appearances, which cease thereafter to be puzzling. But this must not be regarded as a journey from illusion to reality. It is rather a process of elucidating one reality by disclosing its foundation in and determination by another. Thus the form of value (viz., exchange-value) and the object character of social relations is not dissolved or dissipated by Marx as an illusion, but its content is laid bare: the individuals working independently and producing use-values not for direct consumption but for exchange. It is the commodity form itself which is responsible for the enigma (I, 71), and its solution therefore requires an analysis of that form. Similarly, Marx uncovers the content of surplus-value by indicating its source in the surplus labour-time of the worker. He thus discovers *its* secret. Bourgeois political economy, itself unable to hit upon this secret, except in the New World (I, 774) and, even there, without drawing the necessary conclusions, takes the only other road open to it. It de-historicizes value and surplus-value, makes of them products of nature, and, in parallel fashion, regards the impersonal and objective form of capitalist social relations as an entirely natural state of affairs. It thus transforms the properties possessed by commodities, capital, etc., qua *social* objects, into qualities belonging *naturally* to them as things. *This* is the root and beginning of the mystification of fetishism.

2. It is not that something imaginary has been endowed with the quality of reality. The mechanism of mystification consists in the collapsing of social facts into natural ones. In this way, the value form is fetishized. This is expressed most clearly by Marx in a passage in the second volume, where he refers to: '... the fetishism peculiar to bourgeois Political Economy, the fetishism which metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things' (II, 225).

There is, however, no shortage of examples of Marx observing this metamorphosis in relation to particular features of capitalist society. Thus he writes of the productive power of social labour: '... co-operation begins only with the labour-process, but they [i.e. the workers] have then ceased to belong to themselves... Hence, the productive power developed by the labourer when working in co-operation, is the productive power of capital... Because this power costs capital nothing, and because, on the other hand, the labourer himself does not develop it before his labour belongs to capital, it appears as a power with which capital is endowed by Nature' (I, 333).

And of money: 'What appears to happen is, not that gold becomes money, in consequence of all other commodities expressing their values in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in gold, because it is money... These objects, gold and silver, just as they come out of the bowels of the earth, are forthwith the direct incarnation of all human labour. Hence the magic of money'(I, 92).¹⁴

And of interest-bearing capital: 'It becomes a property of money to generate value and yield interest, much as it is an attribute of pear-trees to bear pears' (III, 384).

Now, it is in order to undo the mystifying effects of this metamorphosis that Marx insists: '... capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character' (III, 794).¹⁵

The demystification is achieved by means of a denaturation. But this is not the same thing as a de-objectification. Pending the destruction of bourgeois society, capital remains an objective form, a social object, whose content and essence are accumulated labour, which dominates the agents of that society, and it must be comprehended as such.

It should further be noted that the *false* appearances to which the fetishization of forms gives rise are yet 'something more and else than mere illusions.'¹⁶ By this I mean that they are not attributable simply to a failure of perspicacity on the part of the social agents, to some act of

¹⁴ Cf. I, 57–58

¹⁵ Cf. I, 766.

¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre: *The Sociology of Marx* (London 1968), p. 62.

'forgetfulness', with its source in purely subjective deficiencies. In every case where Marx presents us with an example of fetishization, he goes to great pains to indicate the roots and *raison d'être* of the resulting illusions in the reality itself. Briefly, most, though not all, of his indications can be subsumed under the following general kind of explanation: in capitalist society, the social relations between the producers take the form of objective qualities belonging to their products, namely, commodities; there is nothing, however, in the commodity which indicates that these qualities which it actually possesses as a commodity (say, money) do not belong to it as a thing (gold); the collapse into nature is therefore itself perfectly 'natural', i.e., comprehensible. If then the social agents experience capitalist society as something other than it really is, this is fundamentally because capitalist society *presents itself* as something other than it really is. As Maurice Godelier has put it: 'It is not the subject who deceives himself, but *reality* which deceives *him*.'¹⁷

3. We have seen that one type of mystification consists of reducing the social objectivity of the forms of capitalist relations to a natural objectivity. This mystification is fetishism. However, Marx also exposes a second type of mystification, one which involves a reduction of these forms, in the opposite direction, from social objectivity to social *subjectivity*. This occurs when they are declared to be imaginary, fictional forms. While this is not fetishism, indeed, may be regarded as an over-reaction against it, it is nevertheless a mystification: 'The act of exchange gives to the commodity converted into money, not its value, but its specific value-form. By confounding these two distinct things some writers have been led to hold that the value of gold and silver is imaginary . . . But if it be declared that the social characters assumed by objects, or the material forms assumed by the social qualities of labour under the regime of a definite mode of production, are mere symbols, it is in the same breath also declared that these characteristics are arbitrary fictions sanctioned by the so-called universal consent of mankind. This suited the mode of explanation in favour during the 18th century. Unable to account for the origin of the puzzling forms assumed by social relations between man and man, people sought to denude them of their strange appearance by ascribing to them a conventional origin' (I, 90–1).

Thus, the fact that the material forms of capitalist social relations are not natural ones, does not deprive them of their objectivity, that is to say, of their character of being objects, which become independent vis-à-vis the social agents, dominate them according to their own laws, and cannot be ascribed to human subjectivity, either as their source or as their explanation. Such an ascription, whether it be seen as an agreement—convention, consent, social contract—or as a failure of consciousness—act of forgetting, lack of insight, trick of the imagination—has this theoretical consequence: it spirits away the uncontrolled and fundamentally uncontrollable, character of these objects, these forms of capitalist social relations. For, in the first case, it is sufficient to

¹⁷ M. Godelier, 'System, Structure and Contradiction in *Capital*', *Socialist Register* 1967, p. 93.

undo the agreement, make new agreements, work out new conventions, in order to handle the contradictions of capitalism. Marx is plunged into liberal political theory or its poorly disguised variant, social-democratic reformism. In the second case, a new act of consciousness, a reappropriation of the world in thought, serves the same purpose. Marx is plunged into Hegel.

Pure Appearance: the Wage Form

I have dealt, so far, with those forms of capitalist social relations, those modes of appearance in which they present themselves, which are not illusory as such, but are subject to two kinds of transformation which render them mystificatory: they are fetishized, i.e. grounded in nature, or given an idealistic explanation. I come now to the forms which are illusory in the full sense, appearances which are *mere* appearances. First and foremost here, because it is an illusory form which is itself the source of a number of other illusions, is the wage form. In this, the value of labour-power is transformed in such a way that it takes on the (false) appearance of the value of labour. It 'thus extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labour and surplus-labour, into paid and unpaid labour' (I, 539). Which is to say, it conceals the *essential* feature of capitalist relations, namely, exploitation. The latter is based on the difference between the value of labour-power, for which the capitalist pays in order to use it for a given time, and the greater value which the same labour-power in operation creates during that time. But since, in the wage form, what appears to happen is that the capitalist pays, not for the labour-power, but for the labour, the inequality of the exchange is falsely disguised as an equal exchange.

Those passages where Marx refers to the difference between the value of labour-power and the value it creates as 'a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injury to the seller' (I, 194), and where he denies that 'the seller has been defrauded' (I, 585), must therefore be regarded as having a provisional and double-edged character. On the one hand, it is indeed the case that capitalist exploitation is not fundamentally based on the individual capitalist cheating his workers; according to all the laws of commodity production, the worker does get paid for the full value of the commodity he sells. On the other hand, these laws themselves entail an injury and a fraud much greater than individual cheating, the unconscious injury and defrauding of one class by another. The provisional character of the original statements is, therefore, made plain: 'The exchange of equivalents, the original operation with which we started, has now become turned round in such a way that there is only an apparent exchange . . . The relation of exchange subsisting between capitalist and labourer becomes a mere semblance appertaining to the process of circulation, a mere form, foreign to the real nature of the transaction, and only mystifying it' (I, 583).

Here, the analysis of the form which reveals the content, the penetration of the appearance which discloses the essence, *is* a journey from illusion to reality. The same goes for another of the appearances to which the

wage form gives rise: namely, the appearance that the worker disposes of his labour-power according to his own free will. This is a mere appearance, an illusion, whose reality is that the worker is forced to sell his labour-power. Thus, the transition from the sphere of circulation, that 'very Eden of the innate rights of man [where] alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham' (I, 176), to that of production which reveals 'that the time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the time for which he is forced to sell it' (I, 302). This transition is one from illusion to reality: '. . . in essence it always remains forced labour—no matter how much it may seem to result from free contractual agreement' (III, 798).

However, two precisions are required at this point.

1. I have said that these analyses which refer us from the appearance (equal exchange, free labour) to the essence (unequal exchange, forced labour), are at the same time journeys from illusion to reality. They are also, it is clear from the above, transitions from the process of circulation to the process of production. But the circulation process is no illusion. What we are dealing with here are illusions arising *in* and *during* the circulation process by contrast with the realities uncovered by an analysis of the production process. This precision is important, because it is at all costs necessary to avoid dissolving the various 'levels' of the social totality, by regarding them all as mere forms of manifestation of one essential level, and thus depriving them of their specific efficacy. It is the attempt to theorize this necessity in the concept of 'over-determination' that is Althusser's real contribution to contemporary Marxist discussion.¹⁸ Nor is it simply a question here of the relation between the circulation and production processes. As Marx makes clear, from these semblances of the sphere of circulation there arises a whole ideological superstructure: 'This phenomenal form [i.e. the wage form], which makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all the juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, of all its illusions as to liberty, of all the apologetic shifts of the vulgar economists' (I, 540).

The Marxist critique of the illusions pertaining to this superstructure equally does not deprive it of its positive reality.

2. The decisive factor, which makes possible the discovery in the production process of the essence of the false appearances of circulation, consists in this: that, in moving from circulation to production, the analysis moves from the consideration of relationships between individuals to that of the relations between classes, of which the former are a function. Only this change of terrain can demystify the appearances. Its importance will be dealt with at a later stage of the argument.

The wage form, then, unlike the value form, corresponds to no objective reality. Marx is quite unequivocal on this point and attempts to give it special emphasis: '. . . "value of labour". . . is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth' (I, 537).

¹⁸ 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' in *For Marx*, op.cit.

‘... “price of labour” is just as irrational as a yellow logarithm’ (III, 798).

And yet this illusory form is not one that is easily seen through or dissipated. Marx gave notice of this when he described as one of the three new elements of *Capital* his discovery of the irrationality of the wage form (Marx to Engels, 8/1/1868). But he also says it explicitly in *Capital*: ‘These imaginary expressions arise, however, from the relations of production themselves’ (I, 537).

‘... the price of labour-power ... inevitably appears as the price of labour under the capitalist mode of production’ (III, 801).

‘If history took a long time to get at the bottom of the mystery of wages, nothing, on the other hand, is more easy to understand than the necessity, the *raison d’être*, of this phenomenon’ (I, 540).

Like the illusions of fetishism discussed above, the illusion of the wage form is opaque and tenacious, because here as there it is a case of reality deceiving the subject rather than the subject deceiving himself. This is the way the value of labour-power *presents itself*. And Marx analyses some of the mechanisms of the process—e.g. changes of wages corresponding with the changing length of the working day; ‘price of labour’ does not seem more irrational than ‘price of cotton’, exchange-value and use-value being intrinsically incommensurable magnitudes anyway (I, 540–1). In this, as in the earlier case, what Marx tells us is that capitalist society itself is characterized by a quality of opacity, so that *it* creates the necessity of a methodology which will penetrate the appearance to uncover the reality, and then, by a reverse course, so to speak, demonstrate why this reality should take on such an appearance.

Science and Ideology: the Althusserian Disjuncture

But, at all events, this opacity is a historically specific one. For Marx, different types of social relations are characterized by different degrees of opacity and transparency, and capitalism itself creates the historical possibility of a society where ‘the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature’ (I, 79). A socialist society would then be one where the social relations are not concealed or distorted by mystificatory ideologies. But here the notion that the distinction, essence/appearance, is a form of scientificity as such recurs in the shape of a problem. For, if the relations of a socialist society will be transparent, then surely this distinction will be unnecessary to the science of that society, and should be understood, like value and surplus-value, as part of that conceptual apparatus necessary to the analysis of capitalism; and not, like, say, forces and relations of production, as one of the concepts which Marxism brings to the analysis of any social formation. Marx’s first specification of the theoretical status of the distinction is then further called into question.

In this connexion it is not irrelevant to observe that, in much the same

way as he de-historicizes the concept of alienation, Althusser obliterates the historical specificity of capitalist opacity in his thesis that, for Marx, even a communist society would not be without its ideology (and ideology in the Marxist sense, i.e., involving false consciousness).¹⁹ Moreover it is not the interpretation of Marx that is in question. There are serious theoretical consequences. What becomes, for example, of the notion of the proletariat taking cognizance of its real situation in capitalist society in the act (process, praxis) of abolishing it; of its comprehending the real mechanisms of capitalist exploitation, and revolting against them to create a society in which, among other things, it will be neither exploited nor mystified? What, in short, becomes of the notion of class consciousness? It has vanished literally without trace. In its place appears the radical disjunction (a new 'coupure', this) between the theory, the scientific knowledge, of socialist intellectuals and the ideology of the masses. Thus, Althusser speaks of categories appropriate for the ideological struggle but deficient for the purposes of theory,²⁰ and of Marxism as a science which produces new forms of ideology in the masses.²¹ The unity between the theory of the theoreticians and the practice of the class is broken and one is left with nothing other than a variant of hostile bourgeois caricatures of Leninism: the political leaders use their knowledge to manipulate the consciousness of the masses. Once again, there is a legitimate concern at the bottom of this false position: the concern to preserve the specificity of theoretical practice. There is, after all, some distance between the consciousness of even the most revolutionary worker and the science of Marx or Lenin. But it is a distance and not a rupture. Further, it is the distance of a dialectical relationship, because traversed in both directions. The scientific theory is brought to bear on the consciousness of the class, but the consciousness of the class also directs and provides orientation for the theory. If this unity is sundered, it becomes difficult to distinguish the Marxist theory of political struggle from a theory of manipulation.²² Perhaps for this reason, Althusser has more recently permitted himself some more adequate formulations of the relation between theory and class, ones precisely which lay emphasis on the ability of the proletariat to comprehend its objective position, and thus liberate it from the postulated eternal subjection to ideology.²³ What is questionable is whether such formulations can be rendered coherent with the theoretical structure he had previously elaborated, or whether, on the other hand, to defend them and give them foundation, he will be forced to abandon his positions one after another.

The source of Althusser's error is that he read in *Capital* only a theory of the *raison d'être* of mystification, a theory which, to be sure, is there. But in this reading he failed to perceive what is also there, a theory of the conditions and possibility of demystification. The latter is, perhaps, less developed than the first, and this primarily because *Capital*

¹⁹ *For Marx*, p. 232; *Reading Capital*, p. 177.

²⁰ *For Marx*, p. 199.

²¹ *Reading Capital*, p. 131.

²² J.-C. Forquin, op.cit., p. 31.

²³ Louis Althusser: 'Avertissement aux lecteurs du livre I du *Capital*', in *Le Capital*, Livre I (Garnier-Flammarion, Paris 1969), p. 25.

terminates abruptly as Marx takes up the consideration of classes—‘Vingt lignes, puis le silence’.²⁴ Yet it is plain enough. Speaking of the way in which exploitation is concealed by the circulation process, Marx goes on: ‘To be sure, the matter looks quite different if we consider capitalist production in the uninterrupted flow of its renewal, and if, in place of the individual capitalist and the individual worker, we view them in their totality, the capitalist class and the working class confronting each other. But in so doing we should be applying standards entirely foreign to commodity production’ (I, 586).

The matter looks quite different: the appearance of a relation of equality between individuals gives way to the reality of collective exploitation. And this is achieved by an analysis of the *essential* relations of capitalist society, i.e. the class relations. But it is not only theoretical analysis which has this effect. The *political struggle of the working class* is an exact duplication. Here, not the analyst, but the organized working class applies ‘standards entirely foreign to commodity production’. It ceases to consider the relation of individual capitalist to individual worker and views them ‘in their totality’ by actually confronting the capitalist class as a whole. By doing so it penetrates the false appearances of bourgeois ideology. This in no sense invalidates Marx’s proposition that the workers are inevitably mystified so long as, and to the extent that, they remain trapped within bourgeois relations of production. For, this is so. But the proletariat does not escape these relations of production only on the day of the socialist revolution. It begins to move outside them from the moment it engages in organized political struggle, since the latter involves the adoption of a class position, this criterion entirely foreign to commodity production, and the refusal any longer to think exclusively in terms of relations between individuals. For this reason, the ‘structuralist’ notions of the revolution as rupture (Althusser) or limit (Godelier) are less precise than the notion of revolution as praxis (with, to be sure, its ruptural point). And the full force of Rosa Luxemburg’s insistence on the demystifying effects of mass political struggle becomes evident. At the same time, the Althusserian disjunction between the consciousness of the masses and that of the theoretician is shown to lack foundation. The integral relation between the two is based on the fact that the theoretician takes up, in analysis, the same positions as the masses adopt in political struggle; though, of course, this should not be understood as a reduction of the sort ‘theory is practice’.

The above passage from Marx also introduces another dimension of the distinction, essence/appearance, one which has been emphasized, above all, by Herbert Marcuse.²⁵ As we have seen, all the concepts with which Marx specifies the essential relations of capitalist society have a basically cognitive function. They make possible a knowledge of reality in opposition to the false evidences of immediate appearances. But, if, in order to do this, and in the process of doing it, they refer us to ‘standards entirely foreign to commodity production’, then they are at the same time critical concepts. Thus, the concept of surplus-value

²⁴ *Reading Capital*, p. 193.

²⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, New York 1963, pp. 258, 295–6 and 321.

not only permits a comprehension of the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. By laying bare the division of the working-day into necessary and surplus labour-time, it envisages a state of affairs in which there is no exploitation. It contains 'an accusation and an imperative'.²⁶ However, this critical function of the concepts must not be understood as a mere taking up of positions, or moralizing. If they fail in their cognitive function, then they are useless in their critical one. When Marx clearly takes his distance from 'that kind of criticism which knows how to judge and condemn the present, but not how to comprehend it' (I, 505), he informs us that the essential concepts derive what validity they have not from their particular moral stance (relativism), but from the fact that they permit a coherent organization of appearances and an explanation of their source such as no other concepts can provide. This is, indeed, the criterion which validates these concepts. As Marcuse has expressed it: 'If the historical structure . . . postulated as 'essential' for the explanation . . . makes it possible to comprehend causally the situation both in its individual phases as well as in terms of the tendencies effective within it, then it is really the essential in that manifold of appearances. This determination of essence is true; it has held good within the theory.'

It remains to make explicit that in *Capital* the distinction between essence and appearance is, as well as everything else, a distinction also between the totality and its parts. Each single relationship or fact is an appearance whose full meaning or reality is only articulated by integrating it theoretically within its total structure. This has already been seen with regard to the light thrown on individual relationships by a consideration of the relations between classes.

But it applies more generally. I confine myself to certain 'pairs' of facts, treated by Marx in his chapter on machinery and modern industry. Machinery is the most powerful instrument for lightening labour; its capitalist employment leads to greater exploitation and domination. Science and technology make huge and unprecedented strides under capitalism; but at the expense of the workers' physical and intellectual powers. Modern machinery shatters the petrified forms of the division of labour creating the need for variability of functions and, thus, for a less one-sided, more rounded, development of the worker; under the anarchic conditions of capitalism, however, the worker lives and experiences this tendency as insecurity of employment and suffering. These pairs of facts are actually contradictions. As such, they represent tendencies which are neither simply progressive, nor simply regressive, because *contradictory*. The essence which explains them, and deprives them of all appearance of contingency, is the central contradiction between forces of production, the increasing productive power of social labour, on the one hand, and relations of production, the continued private appropriation of surplus-value, on the other. They partake of this central contradiction and, as partial facts, are only properly comprehended in relation to the social totality which they and it inhabit.

²⁶ Herbert Marcuse: 'The Concept of Essence' in *Negations* (London 1968), p. 86.