

Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism

Marxist Interpretations vis-à-vis Marx's analyses in *Capital*

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Abstract

In Marx's analysis of the Capitalist Mode of Production and more precisely in his theory of value, the key to decipher the capitalist political and ideological practices and structures is to be found. In this context, many Marxists believed that the analysis of "commodity fetishism" in Section 1 of Volume 1 of *Capital* renders the basis for understanding ideological domination and political coercion under the capitalist rule. The authors argue, that "commodity fetishism" is only a preliminary notion, which allows Marx to arrive, in subsequent Sections of *Capital*, at the concept of the "fetishism of capital".

1. Introduction

From the days of his youth Marx was familiar with the statements of ethnographers on the subject of fetishism and used the term in his own writings.¹ Equally important was in this context the influence of Hegel.²

In this paper we are not going to deal with the different meanings that the notion of fetishism acquires at different points of Marx's work, an issue which is related to the various concepts of fetishism in political economy, political philosophy and the social sciences.³ We will focus on the analysis of commodity fetishism, in an effort to contribute to the comprehension of the different dimensions of this concept, especially in Marx's *Capital*. For this purpose, we will pursue the following course: At the beginning we are going to present various Marxist approaches to the subject. Subsequently, we are going to read these approaches in the light of Marx's analysis. In this way we will attempt to investigate if and to what extent the notion of fetishism has itself attained a fetishist function within Marxism, creating inversions, transpositions and misinterpretations, and what is actually its significance in the framework of the Marxist approach to ideology.

Marx introduced the notion of commodity fetishism in Section 4 of Chapter 1, Volume 1 of *Capital*, to describe the "mysterious character of the commodity-form", which consists in the fact that "the definite social relation between men themselves ... assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things".⁴

¹ Marx 1976, pp. 89-90; Marx 1968, p. 532-3, 552.

² Pietz 1993, pp. 137-43.

³ Spyer (ed.) 1998; Apter and Pietz (eds.) 1993.

⁴ Marx 1990, pp. 164-5.

Commodity fetishism has become, ever since, one of the classic themes in the Marxist bibliography.⁵ But what is interesting about these studies is primarily attributable to the fact that the analyses of fetishism are linked to issues which are controversial among Marxists, i.e. that they function as a point of departure for certain political strategies and as a symbol for them. All of which helps to explain the variety of viewpoints propounded, and the ardour of those who propound them, in the discussion on what Marx said in the section of fetishism in the first chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital*, which is usually considered to exhaust his theoretical deliberations on the subject.

If the philosophers and ethnographers of colonialism found themselves confronted with the methodological question of how it is possible to achieve an outward description of fetishism corresponding to the inward reality of the primitive community, Marx's *Capital* is of particular interest for the way it *inverts* this outlook. Marx aspires to an analysis of fetishism in his own culture, that is, a fetishism in which himself is involved as an inward-looking observer. Marx portrays inward observation as externally valid, i.e. as an objective description of the phenomenon of misapprehension, in which himself is implicated.⁶

This approach is particularly fruitful, but faces the Epimenides paradox: Should we believe someone who says he is a liar? Who is on "the neutral ground of the inward observer"?⁷ Marxism gives a variety of answers: through the dialectic of Being and Consciousness, through epistemological studies of bias and analyses of the functioning of ideology and its transcendence.

In relation to fetishism a dual answer may be given. On the one hand, because of its origins, the concept of fetishism has the advantage of retaining its *outward connotations*, notwithstanding its being employed by Marx with inward reference. Being transferred by analogy from the observation of an indigenous community to the community of the observer, it retains an external reference, which enables the internal observer to carry out a distanced analysis of the elements of illusion which the members of his/her own community experience in their social relations.

The second element in the answer is that Marx avoids a purely inward observation by employing the *comparative method*. He contraposes capitalism to other communities, both real and imaginary, finding points of support in the comparative material so derived that enable him to come to an understanding of fetishism by using external points of reference. Through the parallels Marx draws with various other societies he situates himself simultaneously inside society and outside it. He shows the reader what fetishism is without "transcending" it himself, but comprehending it as a *necessary manifestation of concrete social relationships*.

It is from analogy and metaphor that the descriptive power and the critical function of Marxian fetishism concept are derived.⁸ It thus emerges that Marx's inward analysis is external in two senses.

⁵ See for example the bibliography in Iacono 1992, pp. 82-3; Pietz 1993.

⁶ Iacono 1992, pp. 75, 78.

⁷ Iacono 1992, p. 82.

⁸ Iacono 1992, pp. 89-91, 99-100, 111.

Firstly, he employs a concept imbued with the remoteness of the external observer of primitives, and secondly the concept of fetishism is not used only metaphorically but also comparatively.

2. Fetishism of Marxists

The concept of commodity fetishism is not hard to understand and there are no disagreements between Marxists as to its content. If this concept functions as a kind of touchstone of Marxism, this is attributable to disagreements about its implications, i.e. to its association with philosophical constructions and political strategies. In this chapter we will reconstruct and critically evaluate the basic arguments of the Marxist controversies over the concept of fetishism.

2.1 *Fetishism as “alienation” (Lukács)*

2.1.1 *Subject-object dialectic and consciousness*

In this section, we will take as our point of departure Lukács' work *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), where commodity fetishism serves as the central theoretical concept. In highly repetitive fashion, the following theses are propounded.⁹

a) *The theoretical position of fetishism.* The key to the understanding of all aspects of capitalist society must be “sought for in the solution to the enigma of the commodity *structure*” (170). This structure constitutes an “archetype” for every form of existence of objects and every form of subjectivity (170). The essence of the commodity structure is defined as “a relation between persons acquiring a reified character ..., which through its strict –and to all appearance completely closed and rational– autonomy, conceals every trace of its fundamental essence, i.e. as a relation between human beings” (170-1).

Comprehension of the ideology of capitalism and of the prerequisites for its elimination presupposes comprehension of the fetishistic character of the commodity as a “form of objectivity” but also as a basis “for subjective behaviour” (171). In this way commodity fetishism is treated as the quintessence of Marxism and basis for the theory and politics of the transition to socialism: “The chapter on the fetishistic character of the commodity contains all of historical materialism, all of the self-knowledge of the proletariat as the consciousness of capitalist society” (pp. 297-8).

b) *Structure of fetishism.* Wherever the “rule of the commodity” (172), i.e. wherever the commodity form is imposed as the “universal form” (173), social development and consciousness are subjected to the basic element in the rule of the commodity, “reification” (174). Lukács describes the “primary phenomenon of reification” (174), quoting the best-known extracts of Marx's analysis of fetishism in the first chapter of

⁹ In the present section, the quotations cited by page number alone come from Lukács 1988.

Volume 1 of *Capital*. Human labour is “counterposed” to the human being as “something objective, independent of him, which rules over the human being with an autonomy that is alien to him” (175).

From an objective viewpoint commodities are counterposed to the human being as “a world of ready-made things and relations between things”, as “powers which act autonomously” (175). From a subjective viewpoint, human activity takes the form of the commodity and is “reified”, i.e. moves on the basis of the laws of “an objectivity alien to the human being” (175/6). When the commodity form is universalised (capitalism), human labour is rendered an “abstraction” (175) which is objectified in commodities, becoming a “thing” which is sold (193). This leads to a “perpetually increasing rationalisation, to an ever intensifying exclusion of the qualitative, individual-human characteristics of the worker” (176-7). In economics, in science, in politics and philosophy, what prevails is measurability and rational calculability, in the sense that the human element is excluded (176-7, 187 ff., 195 ff., 291 ff.).

c) *Consequences of fetishism*. The human being is rendered “a mechanised component of a mechanical system” to which he is helplessly subordinated (179, 292). Everything subjective has the appearance of an “element of error” (178). A new “structure of consciousness” is imposed on all groups in society (191).¹⁰ The activity of the worker loses its “character of activity” and becomes a “*contemplative stance*” in relation to the closed system of machines which is levelling all before it (179). The person incorporated into this system becomes a “helpless spectator” (180), “a cog in the wheel of economic development” (296, 313). The further the extension of capitalism, the deeper the penetration of the “structure of reification” into human consciousness (185). It is engraved on all interpersonal relations without exception, which become commodified and determine the way in which the individual regards his own qualities and abilities: the elements of personality become objects which the individual “possesses” and can “alienate” (194). “The human being is objectified as a commodity” and his consciousness becomes “*the self-consciousness of the commodity*” (294-95).

At the same time fetishism “misshapes” the reified character of the object (184), quantifies objects into “fetishised exchange prices” (299). The totality of social phenomena undergoes a “process of transformation” in the direction of reification (187, 299). Under conditions of fetishism people become things and things lose their material character, being transformed into anonymous quantities.

d) *Political prospects*. The point of departure is the position that reification is synonymous with dehumanisation and debasement (268, 301): Even though the “reification of every life-manifestation” strikes at all social classes in capitalism, the proletariat experiences it in its most extreme form, being subjected to the “most profound dehumanisation” (268, 291, 300). The proletarians find themselves “directly and *wholly* on the side of the object” and are “an object and not an active factor in the work process” (294-95).

The proletariat come to an understanding of history as it acquires “self-knowledge of its social position”, i.e. that “inhuman objectivity” (307) is necessary to capitalism (282). This is of particular political importance: while the slave who becomes aware that he is a slave changes nothing in his situation, i.e. in the object of knowledge, the proletarian who comprehends that his fate is to be dehumanised acquires

¹⁰ “Reification is *general*, a fundamental structural phenomenon of the *entirety* of bourgeois society” (p. 192, note 22). The human being becomes a “number” or a “mechanised and rationalised implement”, he is “broken down (...) into an element in the movement of commodities” (pp. 291-2).

knowledge with direct practical consequences: the knowledge changes the object of knowledge (295-6, 309). The proletariat discovers the “vital core” behind the reification, i.e. he understands that in reality what exists is not things or relations between things but relations between people (296). This is how the fetishistic character of commodities is exposed and their real character as a relation between humans is brought to light (295-296, 309).

Thus the proletariat is able to make an empirical break with the bourgeois quantitative way of thinking and to regard society “as a dialectical unity” (297, 301, 338). When the consciousness of the proletariat becomes “the self-consciousness of the whole community” (313) checks will be imposed on the “full capitalistic rationalisation of the entire social Being” (299). The “*reified structure of Being*” is dissolved into shifting processes and relationships (321). The proletariat thus becomes the “simultaneous subject-object of history” and the practice which changes reality (339).

2.1.2 Idealism

The centrality which Lukács ascribes to the problematic of fetishism presents a number of questionable aspects. For a start it is ahistorically idealistic, presupposing that human beings are born in possession of a kind of “essence”, i.e. that they have a preformed consciousness, type of behaviour and thought, which, confronted by objective factors, is “alienated” under capitalism and becomes a thing, imitating the structure of commodity exchange.

In parallel with the *essentialism*, the formula of fetishism as the matrix of alienation is patently reductionist. Social life is reduced to a principle, which is not the material base as supposed by mechanistic Marxism, but the way in which the bearers of productive relations conceive of this “base”. It is the policy of ignoring the multiplicity of social practices (history, class struggle, the activity of state ideological apparatuses) that is responsible for the over-simplifications of Lukács, e.g. for the position that labour is characterised by the “contemplative stance” of the observer of machines and that every form of thought is associated with the quantification of commercial calculation.

Equally reductionist is the view of ideology as a false consciousness (concealment of the true character of the relations of production) as something which emerges automatically from the form of exchange.¹¹ In creating fetishism, capitalism safeguards the absence of transparency of exploitative relations. This simplification elevates fetishism to a primary and indeed unique ideological dynamic. It is counterbalanced by the hope that the Messiah-proletariat will recognise the “truth” and, constituting itself as a subject, overturn all existing reality. For those who do not believe in the wondrous dialectical leaps anticipated by Lukács, following the young Marx,¹² it remains inexplicable how the absolute “thing” is to be divested of the huge weight of ideology and succeed in overthrowing capitalism on the strength of its “consciousness”.

¹¹ Cf. Amariglio and Callari 1993, p. 196-7.

¹² “Where, then, is the *positive* possibility of a German emancipation? Answer: In the formulation of a class with *radical chains* ... which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat” (Marx 2000).

There is no room in this ideological framework either for questions such as how the erroneous conception of the relations of production has the power to shape every aspect of the existent, or for refutations of the schema by existing reality which indicate that the course of science and politics is not interpretable through schematic models of “decline”. Also unexplained is the passage from commodity fetishism to transformation of everything under the sun into alienated and reified objects.¹³

Lukács attributes to Marxism a specific core, which for him is the analysis of fetishism. When the products of man’s labour come to dominate man irrespective of his class position and when every person becomes a thing, Marxism is reduced to a theory of interpretation and exposure of this “automated” false consciousness. The theory of ideology is then restricted to the discovery of a simple secret: the subject becomes a thing, but it can return to itself, linking up again with the true human “core” of history, thanks to a revolution in apprehension.¹⁴

2.2 *Legal fetishism (Pashukanis)*

2.2.1 Fetishism, the bourgeois state and law

The Soviet jurist Evgeny Pashukanis developed his conception of the forms of the bourgeois legal system on the basis of a particular finding.¹⁵ If we define law as a system of social relationships corresponding to the interests of the ruling class and safeguarded by institutionalised violence, we certainly capture the class content of legal forms, i.e. the correspondence with the interests of the ruling class, and not with the general interest, peace, justice, etc., but we provide no answer to the decisive question: “Why does this content take this form?” (59).

Perceiving the blind alley entailed in the definition of law as coercion, Pashukanis develops a theory of law as *consent*,¹⁶ which utilises an analysis of commodity fetishism incorporating the following positions:

a) *The matrix of the legal system*. A specific element of the legal system is that it concerns “isolated, separate subjects”, the individuals who have rights (77).

b) *The legal system as private and capitalist law*. “The legal form of the subject vested with rights arises in a society comprised of selfish, isolated bearers of individual interests”, i.e. a society based “on an

¹³ There is an obvious affinity between Lukács’ outlook and that of the theorists who attribute to capitalism an exclusively symbolic and spectacular function: labour and politics are no more. War is waged on television. The economy is determined by the VDU monitors in the stock exchange, etc.

¹⁴ The universalising outlook is conspicuous in the analysis of Goux, who maintains that: “Speech-centredness is the linguistic term for the universal and dominant principle of marketability, based on abstract labour” (Goux 1975, p. 140). At another point he considers that “the enslavement of the worker by capital, which is perpetuated by the institution of money, is also implemented through the repression of the operative form of writing, which is debased along with the element of meaning, and repressed through subordination to speech-centredness” (pp. 147, 182-4, 190-1).

A highly elaborated version of the alienation-problematic was formulated by Sohn-Rethel (1990, pp. 53-4, 68-9, 91-2, 96). The author stresses the fact of the dissociation of intellectual from manual labour, and considers the concepts formulated by the bourgeois philosophy as “the alienation of an alienation”.

¹⁵ In the present section, the quotations cited by page number alone come from Paschukanis 1929.

¹⁶ Müller-Tuckfeld 1994.

agreement between free individual wills” (80). Public law is imitating the structure of private law, though it organises the interests of the society’s dominant class, and its role is not to guarantee the rights of the individual. The legal form cannot exist in a guise other than that of individual interest and will. Public law becomes a “reflection” of private law (80-4). The bourgeois state (an “impersonal abstraction” which is “merged entirely into the abstract objective rule”) is a “reflection” of the “private” structure of law (118, 123-4).

The result of this is that Pashukanis perceives as law only the law of capitalist society, which is based on the individuals as commodity owners. It thus excludes from the realm of law systems of social regulation from other modes of production which were ignorant of the concept of the subject as a status common to all people (123 ff.).

c) *Legal fetishes*. The question arises as to how certain sentient beings are transformed into abstract and equal subjects of law (93). Following the “private approach”, Pashukanis notes that the analysis of the form of the subject must take as its point of departure an analysis of the commodity form, which demonstrates that social relations take on the characteristics of relations between things (89-90). The legal subject arises from the act of exchange, in which the human being realises his/her absolute and abstract freedom of will. As a subject he/she is the owner of the commodity-object and he/she exchanges it. It is in this way that there arises the legal fetishism which complements commodity fetishism. In commodity fetishism things are the bearers of value in a natural way. In legal fetishism the subjects which move the things are natural vehicles for domination.

In this way social relations take on a form which is doubly mysterious. They appear as relations between things and at the same time relations between subjects (95-6). Abstract labour, the abstract subject, abstract legal rules, impersonal state power. This is the specifically bourgeois mechanism of assimilation, creator of capitalist law by inducing social entities whose material foundations are to be found in the act of exchange.¹⁷

d) *The withering away of the law*. For as long as market or value determined relations are preserved, the legal system will also be preserved. In countries where proletarian power has prevailed, the withering away of the law will become possible only with the abolition of economic relations based on contract and the resolution of conflicts in courts (110 ff.). And here there is an obvious parallel between law and economics. Just as commodity fetishism will be abolished only when capitalism too is abolished, so the fate of bourgeois law and its subjects are likewise indissolubly linked to capitalism.

2.2.2 *Economism or structural interpretation?*

The analogy between the commodity as a natural bearer of value, the subject as a natural vehicle for the human will and the state as abstract macro-subject¹⁸ is based on the hypothesis that there exists a structural

¹⁷ “The legal form ... also finds its material foundation in the act of exchange ..., the act of exchange brings together ... the essential elements both of political economy and of law” (p. 100).

¹⁸ For the state as macro-subject linked with legal subjects and the contradictions of “dual sovereignty” of individual and state, see Dimoulis 1996, pp. 582 ff.

similarity of a causal type, and through this an attempt will be made to interpret the legal system. Pashukanis thus adopts the classically Marxist schema of base-superstructure, searching in the former for the “secret” of the latter.

Pashukanis is commonly charged with economism, i.e. with ignoring the relative autonomy of the legal system.¹⁹ But the charge is not well-founded. Pashukanis does not assert that the legal system lacks autonomy, nor that the base determines what is to become law (statutes, court decisions, doctrines). His analysis aims at demonstrating in what way the structure of a society (the operating principles which comprise the semantic core of a mode of production) make it necessary for there to be a system of rules for social regulation adopting certain assumptions and forcibly imposing them as generally applicable (free and equal subjects, contract, structuring of public law on the basis of private, free will).

This system of rules functions on the basis of free negotiations between sovereign individuals.²⁰ Pashukanis gives the name of “law” to this system of rules. To explain the necessity for it under capitalism he demonstrates the similarity of its principles to the structure of generalised commodity circulation. Establishing this causal linkage (the principles of law reflect the structure of production), Pashukanis transcends the theory of coercion (law as the product of a dominant political will). He gives an interpretation of the structural reasons for consent to it (correspondence with the structure of production, i.e. with the fetishistic representations which are imposed on individuals by the laws of the economy) and succeeds in explaining why the law has specific contents and codes in bourgeois societies.

It is certainly possible for law to be defined more broadly so that it includes the legal systems of other modes of production. Pashukanis’ absolute stance (capitalism = bourgeois law = private law = law) aims at showing that a legal system with the structural characteristics of bourgeois private law did not exist prior to capitalism and will not exist subsequent to capitalism because it is derived from a historically *specific* regulation of sociability through the circulation of commodities. This kind of law is of a historically unique character because of its form and – we might add – because of the universal character of its implementation, in contrast with previous social norms.²¹

Through this absolute stance, Pashukanis avoids the idealistic trap of giving the usual formalistic definition of law. Such a formalistic definition has two consequences. On the one hand bourgeois private law appears as the concrete historical expression of the legal regulation necessary in every human community (“ubi societas ibi ius”).²² On the other, law is linked to the “idea of Justice” so that in order for one to be able to speak of justice in general despite the huge differences between the various systems of social regulation and coercion, there must be a common element between them. This leads to the appearance

¹⁹ Müller-Tuckfeld 1994, p. 189.

²⁰ See also Engelskirchen 2001.

²¹ Legal historians speak of an “extensive-mass” implementation of legal rules under capitalism, in contrast to a “restricted-selective” application of mediaeval and “absolutist” law as a means of social control (Sabadell 1999, pp. 169-72).

²² Thus, for example, an important German constitutionalist of social-democratic persuasions reproached Pashukanis for “ignoring” that even the most homogeneous society requires its positive law and thus governing will be capable of framing it and safeguarding it (Heller 1934, p. 196).

of bourgeois private law as the best and “most human” form of law (freedom, equality, separation of powers, contractuality, moderate punishments, etc.).²³

Neither the other viewpoints positing a purpose or origin of law (the “spirit” of a nation, expression of the collective will of a community, observance of the prescriptions of the legislator, will of the authorities charged with implementation of the law, etc.) nor the critical assumption that violence is the essence of law escape from this idealistic trap. The latter view has the advantage of realism. It establishes the “law = power” paradigm and provides a satisfactory explanation of the origins of a rule which is represented as just or necessary. Nevertheless, above and beyond its genealogical accuracy, it is incapable of explaining the specialised character and the specific mode of operation of the bourgeois legal system, as Pashukanis perceived.

The position opted for by Pashukanis cannot therefore be described as economicist, unless we regard as economicist any analysis which considers that legal and ideological phenomena are linked to the structure of production. His approach reflects the well-known observation of Marx, in the *Grundrisse*:

Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*. As pure ideas they are merely the idealised expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations they are merely this basis to a higher power.²⁴

This view is repeatedly expressed by Marx in *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, regarding the legal concepts of equality and freedom as reflection of commodity production and circulation.²⁵ These positions are susceptible to an economicist reading, if we suppose that Divine Providence produces a superstructure perfectly suited to a certain base, i.e. if the process of production of the superstructure is treated ahistorically as automatic adjustment to the base, which would entail the process of formation of the base taking place in an ideological and political void, or in connection with an adverse superstructure.²⁶

²³ For the implication of a general definition of law see Dimoulis 1996, pp. 30-1, 47-8.

²⁴ Marx 1993, p. 245.

²⁵ Balibar 1997, p. 194. Marx observes: “All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed present to the eye the precise opposite of that relation” (Marx 1990, p. 680). Marx puts forward the same idea more clearly in a letter to Engels, dated 2 April 1858: “This simple circulation, considered as such — and it constitutes the surface of bourgeois society in which the underlying operations which gave rise to it are obliterated — evinces no distinction between the objects of exchange, save formal and evanescent ones. Here we have *the realm of liberty, equality and of property based on ‘labour’*” (Marx, 2000-a). As a site for (and process of) exchange of equivalents, the market, even when it is the labour market, embodies the realm of equality and freedom, which is a prerequisite for the implementation of “equal exchange”.

²⁶ This is criticised by Althusser when he writes: “Marx did of course attempt in his ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’ to ‘deduce’ a commodity law from (...) commodity relations, but – unless we believe in a providential self-regulation of the commodity relations in question – we do not see how they could function without there being a state-issued currency, without transactions registered by state apparatuses and without courts of law for resolving disagreements” (Althusser 1994, p. 493).

If on the other hand we perceive the formation of bourgeois societies as a derivative of ideology and law in parallel with the violent imposition of capitalist economic relations, the position of Marx and Pashukanis is entirely sound. It shows why the creation of a legal system of universal application, based on free contractual relations between legal subjects of equal status is, from a theoretical viewpoint, inseparable from capitalism as an economic system. Other interpretations of the character of bourgeois private law (progress of humanity, civilisation, rationalisation of the state apparatus as an expression of the general interest, etc.) are not able to demonstrate this. The Marx/Pashukanis analysis is based on a semantic abstraction, because it does not invoke a historically existent point of departure for everything. The deduction is not chronological or developmental but attributes to the “material basis” a logical and/or functional priority.²⁷

Inspired by economic fetishism, Pashukanis designates as *legal fetishism* the view that there exist sovereign (free and equal) subjects which rule over objects and enjoy freedom in their social relations. This particular element of correspondence is overlooked by those who regard as legal fetishism the belief that law has a power in itself to impose its prescriptions, not due to any particular balance in class forces. The belief that the rule of law applies because it applies is nevertheless an ideological consequence of its everyday application and to characterise it as fetishism is a choice which is linked to the pre-Marxian usage of the term fetishism (law has supernatural power to move the world, like an inanimate idol).

In contrast, Pashukanis’ interpretation of fetishism aims at demonstrating the transformational effects of legal fetishism: imposition of a model of interpersonal relations corresponding to the structure of exchange but which cannot prevail socially in the absence of legal regulation. With this enriched concept of fetishism, Pashukanis offers an interpretation of the structural specificity of bourgeois law.

The common element in the above approaches is that they accept the Marxist analysis of fetishism in the first chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital*, elaborating it in different directions.²⁸ The Lukácsian outlook is *extensive-universalising*. Commodity fetishism is seen as a process of alienation, which is not confined to production of a false image of acts of exchange but extends to all social activities (reification of subjectivity, quantification of thought on the model of economic calculation). Fetishism is thus treated as the matrix of a structure of alienation which destroys the authentic structure of social relations. The hope is that this descent into total ignominy will implant in the proletariat the consciousness and the spirit of revolt that will put an end to the alienation.

²⁷ Norrie argues correctly that a historical synchrony exists between law and commodity exchange. Then he extends this argument to the logical synchrony: “The logical relationship between exchange and the juridical form is not one of on-sided priority: it is one of true symbiosis ... Marx does not imagine for a moment that exchange is logically prior to the juridical” (Norrie 1982, p. 423). However, if we abandon the thesis of logical/functional priority of the economic over the juridical level, then we shall also abandon the Marxian scheme of basis/superstructure and accept that specific legal norms (as well as the state apparatuses which implement them) may shape the mode of production. This is undoubtedly an approach contrary to the Marxist theory in general, and in any case to the analysis of Pashukanis, who constantly refers to law as a product, an effect or a reflection of commodity exchange, fully accepting the derivation of law from the economy (references to the original Russian text in Naves 2000, pp. 53-4, 69-78). To our opinion, the question of logical priority cannot be resolved by a simple choice of either approach. In order to determine the relationship between the economic and the legal level a definition of each one is needed, which should confront their “common sense” comprehension.

²⁸ Also see Balibar 1993, pp. 67 ff.

Pashukanis' approach is *extensive-comparative*. It links the codes of exchange (value, equivalence) with those of the legal system (subject, will), exposing the structure of the legal system and its inextricable connection with commodity exchange. Legal fetishism may be compared with economic fetishism, being a consequence of it. Here too the view is clear that capitalism has a "flattening" function (homogenising things into exchangeable commodities and people into equalised vehicles of free will).

Nevertheless it is not Pashukanis' purpose to deplore alienation. He analyses the effects of the functioning of a symbolic (but also profoundly political) order which shapes the relations of production in accordance with certain codes. He solves the riddle of the legal framework, stressing that without the "fetishistic" structuring of capitalistic exchange concrete law would not be conceivable. This, fundamentally, is where he differs from Lukács. Pashukanis notes the need for simultaneity in the abolition of the state, its law and the market by means of class struggle and he perceives that the "flattening" operation of fetishism does not in itself have political implications for the process of transition.

2.3 Commodity fetishism as idealism (Althusser school)

At the opposite extreme to this approach is the philosophical-theoretical questioning of the fetishism analysis by the "Althusser School".

2.3.1 Balibar²⁹

Embarking on a critique of the definition of fetishism and its place in the work of Marx (213), Balibar maintains that:

a) *Fetishism is a bourgeois-idealist theory*. Marx carries out his analysis of fetishism before introducing the concept of capital, of the capitalist mode of production or its overall process of reproduction. Without these notions it does not clearly emerge in what context fetishism can be seen operating: bourgeois ideology, legal system based on contracts and other elements with a bearing on the circulation of commodities (218-21). The analysis of fetishism in the first chapter of *Capital* is based on the bourgeois ideological concepts of law and political economy (person/thing, freedom/coercion, natural/social, plan/market). The consequence of this is that ideological misinterpretation is seen as an automatic consequence of the circulation of commodities, with the commodity represented as the Subject or the "reason" for the ideological misinterpretation (227).

b) *Theoretical significance of fetishism*. Marxists who have based their analyses on fetishism have elaborated idealistic anthropologies (Lukács), while materialists (Lenin) have ignored it (220). There are two reasons for this. From a philosophical viewpoint, the theory of fetishism is an impediment to materialist study of ideology, being based on a problematic concerning the origins of the Subject. It does not treat the Subject as an ideological category but as a scientific concept which provides an interpretation of ideological findings. Fetishism is therefore "enthusiastically elaborated" by the "alienation" approach (what is decisive

²⁹ In the present section, the quotations cited by page number alone come from Balibar 1976.

is the consciousness of the Subject) but also by the formalistic-structuralist tendency which is likewise founded on the problematic of the Subject (its position in the process of production leads to the formation of certain representations and illusions: 225-31).

From a methodological viewpoint, those who insist on the “theory” of fetishism assume that *Capital* is imbued with an attitude of continuity: from the simple initial abstraction of the commodity everything is deduced from elaboration of its concrete determinants. But in fact Marx shifts the object of his inquiry in the course of the exposition of *Capital*. The references are not to the commodity and to the value form in general but to the dual character of labour and the process of exchange (222-3).

The fetishism discussion therefore has to do with a “pre-Marxist *philosophical* problematic” (224). At most it represents a “preparatory dialectic” (220), i.e. a critical deflection of the economic categories against themselves, against their utilisation for apologetical purposes (223), given that Marx attempts to criticise economists without having previously developed a theory of ideology (227).

c) *Fetishism against ideology*. The materialistic theory of ideology is obliged to take into account the existence and the operation of “actual *ideological social relations*” which are established in the class struggle, expressed through ideological apparatuses and differentiated from the relations of production, which determine ideological relations only in the final analysis (225).

d) *Political consequences*. The theory of fetishism, despite the fact that it avoids economism, is an impediment to proper understanding of the revolutionary transition because it presents social “transparency” and the end of illusion as an automatic consequence of the proletarian revolution leading to the abolition of the market. Communism is thus presented as the overcoming of alienation and its opposite (end of history) emerges immediately from the transformation of the economic base (229).

2.3.2 Althusser³⁰

In the context of an analysis of Marxist readings of the state and their “impasses”, Althusser referred in 1978 to the question of fetishism. Although in dialogue with Marx, in fact Althusser undertakes no systematic reading or critique of his positions. He intervenes in fully-formed ideological fronts which make use of commodity fetishism as raw material for elaborating their positions. This emerges from a comparison of Althusser’s views with other currents in the Marxist debate but also from the fact that he does not take into account the analyses of his own close collaborators concerning Marx’s conception of fetishism.³¹

Succinctly rephrased, his theses were as follows:

a) *Fetishism as a legal ideology*. Marx’s fetishism is founded on the idea that human labour relations in commodified societies appear as relations between things. This presupposes that the relations of people between themselves and/or the things they produce are transparent (when the ideology of fetishism does not act) because they are immediate. But this presupposition is groundable only in legal ideology, which projects into legal relations the “transparency” of relations of ownership (the object belongs absolutely and

³⁰ In the present section, the quotations cited by page number alone come from Althusser 1994.

³¹ The reference here is principally to the detailed study by Rancière (1996), published in *Reading Capital*, edited by Althusser (first edition 1965), but also to the analyses of Balibar (1976).

directly to the owner-subject). In legal ideology the relations between individuals are equated with the relations between things: two quantities of commodities are brought into correlation in the exchange of equivalents, because two people decided to exchange them and vice versa. Whether we claim that there is an exchange of things or that there is an exchange between subjects, we are in effect saying the same thing (487 ff.).

b) *Fetishism against ideology*. Marxian fetishism is a logical (and ideological) game whose terms are fluid. We cannot distinguish the real from the apparent, the immediate from the mediated. To escape from this ideological circuit we must abandon the legal categories of antithesis between person and thing on which Marx bases his conception of fetishism in Chapter 1. His analysis does not identify the productive mechanisms of fetishism, which is interpreted in terms of the state apparatuses generating mystifications much more complex and effective than the reduction of human relations to relations between things. To put it somewhat differently, the ideological operation – which also effects the naturalisation of what is essentially historical – has to do chiefly with the state and not with commodity exchange (487 ff.).

c) *The reasons for Marx's idealism*. The question arises of why Marx plays this game, defining the concepts of subject and thing in accordance with whatever he has to demonstrate. Althusser suggests three possible interpretations (490-92):

c1) One political explanation is that according to Marx every type of community appears to its own members to be something self-evident and necessary but in fact is neither natural nor eternal. Everything changes, so that one day capitalism too will cease to be. This corresponds to the definition Althusser gives to the concept of fetishism (the tendency for that which exists to be considered “natural”: 495). But this provides no satisfactory explanation of Marx's digression into fetishism. Marx has expressed this view much more persuasively, so that there is no need for this game of the obvious/non-obvious and truth/appearance in order to show the historical mutability of social representations.

c2) A more plausible explanation is that Marx wanted to criticise economists who regard social relationships as relationships between things, but also to justify them, attributing their misconception to the fetishism generated by the commodity exchange mechanism. The price for this is that Marx elevates labour into an essence which takes “predicates” (actual and imaginary, material and social) and that he considers the material elements in production the merely apparent aspect of the labour-essence (coal becomes a “material appearance”) (495). Thus Marx bases the theory of fetishism on the postulate that social relations possess a “material appearance”, a profoundly idealist view.

c3) The most comprehensive explanation is that Marx wanted to find easy arguments at the beginning of *Capital*, speaking only about the concept of value. This is attributable to his “weakness” to commence with the “simplest abstraction” (491). The analysis of fetishism is thoroughly makeshift and fanciful because it is in the wrong place. In the chapter on value Marx is unable to speak about capitalism, about the state and the social classes, i.e. about the notions which help to account for the illusions and the fetishisms of the economists and of the dominant ideology. At the beginning of *Capital*, the philosopher “by the name of Marx” became a prisoner of the legal categories on which the concept of the commodity depends. He became entangled in the bourgeois way of treating value, linking fetishism to the commodity form as such.

d) *Political consequences*. The analyses of fetishism are of political significance within Marxism, because they make possible a dissociation from economism. They are, however, the basis both for humanistic interpretations and for workerist positions supporting proletarian subjectivity and insurrection. In either case the theory of fetishism boils down to a particular form of the humanistic theory of alienation (487), i.e. it belongs to a philosophical approach which Althusser fibrously criticises.

2.4 The “other” fetishism: Gramsci

Before we move on to an examination of the question in the work of Marx it may be of interest to quote two references to fetishism by Gramsci.

The first quotation concerns the relationship between the individual and the collectivities into which he/she is integrated.³² When the individuals who constitute a “collective organisation” perceive it as something external to themselves, functioning without their participation, then that organisation essentially ceases to exist. “It becomes a mental apparition, a fetish”. What is paradoxical is that this fetishistic (critical or simply passive) relationship of individuals to organisations is not to be found only in coercive organisations, like the Church, but also in “non-public”, “voluntary” organisations such as parties and trade unions. A deterministic-mechanistic viewpoint thus arises which portrays these organisations as a “phantasmagorical amalgam”. By contrast, for revolutionary organisations the need for direct participation by individuals, i.e. the overcoming of fetishism even if this creates a situation of apparent chaos, is absolutely vital.

In the second quotation Gramsci describes as “fetishistic history”³³ the dominant interpretation of Italian history. Those represented as protagonists are various mythological figures such as the Revolution, the Union, the Nation and Italy. The historical horizon ends at the national borders and the past is interpreted in the light of the present on the basis of a deterministic linearity. The historical problem of the reason for the establishment of the Italian state and the manner in which it was established is transformed into the problem of discovering that state as a Union or as People or more generally as Italy in all preceding history in exactly the way that the bird must exist inside the fertilised egg.

The former reference has to do with the pre-Marxist meaning of fetishism. An inanimate entity acquires substance as a vehicle for will and action, concealing the real agents. In the latter reference, Gramsci exerts a timely critique to the nationalist mode of thought (the nation is perceived as the perennially existent subject, which is the motive power of history), but also to the nationalistically constituted social sciences which extend theoretical support to this construction.

What is interesting about the quotations from the viewpoint of our problematic is that Gramsci completely ignores the economic dimension of fetishism, although obviously he would have been familiar with Marx’s analysis. Gramsci analyses fetishistic phenomena in the ideological apparatuses of the state (church, parties, trade unions, “nationally”-oriented scholarship). The functioning of certain institutions

³² Gramsci 1975, pp. 1769-71. The title of the extract is “Problems of culture. Fetishism”.

³³ Gramsci 1975, pp. 1980-81.

generates illusions of historical evolution, depicting it as product of the actions of non-existent entities, so that not only is there a misapprehension of reality (classes, individuals, etc.) but also the creation of a distorted image of it conveying an impression of omnipotence of bourgeois institutions.

Even though it does not take into account the complex meaning that Marx attributes to the term “fetishism”, the quotation from Gramsci is a positive foreshadowing of Althusser’s critical remarks to the effect that fetishism is associated with the different stages of ideological production.

3. Fetishism in Marx’s *Capital*

3.1 *The manner of presentation of the theory of value in “Capital”*

Althusser’s and Balibar’s critical outlook refocuses attention on a methodological problem in *Capital*: the fact that Marx examines the question *what is value* and subsequently *what is money* in the first three chapters of Volume 1 of *Capital* before offering a definition of the capitalist mode of production (CMP). This method of exposition has led certain Marxists to the view that value is not a constituent category of the concept of the CMP but that it gives a preliminary description of generalised *simple* commodity production, which preceded capitalism.³⁴

However, Marx introduces the concept of generalised commodity production only as an intellectual construct that will help him to establish the concept of capitalist production. From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*, Marx insisted that value is an expression of relations exclusively characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.³⁵

Apart from the detachment of the concept of value from the CMP and its examination in correlation with a plethora of “commodity” forms and modes of production, the introductory reference to value “in itself” creates again the illusion that the first three chapters of the Volume 1 of *Capital* offer a comprehensive theoretical investigation of the Marxian concept of fetishism.

According to this position the concept of fetishism is adequately formulated in the first chapter of Volume 1, the fourth section of which is entitled “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret”. Here, Marx’s initial reflexions, which flow from a first presentation of generalised commodity circulation, are treated as if they represent developed Marxist theory, with the result that the concept of the CMP and the ideological forms produced within that framework are not taken into account. This is especially true of the analyses in Volume 3 of the *fetishism of capital* (e.g. of interest and interest-bearing capital), which can be decoded in the light of what is written in the first three chapters of Volume 1 about commodity fetishism.

³⁴ Maniatis and O’Hara 1999.

³⁵ “The concept of value is entirely peculiar to the most modern economy, since it is the most abstract expression of capital itself and of the production resting on it. In the concept of value, its secret is betrayed ... The economic concept of value does not occur in antiquity” (Marx 1993, pp. 776-7). “*The value form of the product of labour* is the most abstract, but also the *most general form* of the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character” (Marx 1990, p. 174). For a detailed analysis see Milios et al. 2002, pp. 13-57.

It is not only Lukács and those who saw in commodity fetishism the whole essence of a theory of alienation of mankind that have fallen victim to these illusions, but also Althusser and those who have believed that one can speak seriously of the theory of Marx taking into account *only* the analyses of the first part of Volume 1 of *Capital*.

The paradox is that Althusser had already noted that to introduce the concept of value independently of the concept of capital in the first section of *Capital* was to put the cart before the horse and his colleague Rancière had extensively treated the modification and enrichment of meaning of the concepts introduced by Marx in the first section of Vol. 1 of *Capital*, in the subsequent sections of the same Volume as well as in Vols. 2 & 3.³⁶

On the basis of this consideration we argued above that Althusser's text refers more to "humanistic interpretations" on fetishism than to the overall analysis of Marx. In that sense there is some justification for Althusser's position on the makeshift and fanciful theory of fetishism, deduced from the passages in the first section of Volume 1 on commodity fetishism and subsequently projected onto the entirety of capitalist society, with the analysis grounded in the ideological categories of law and bourgeois economics and not on Marxist concepts or research findings. This criticism was directed at those who "are more interested in the form and less in the content of Marx's theoretical work".³⁷ Nevertheless it did not provide a comprehensive solution to the problem, as was the intention of Althusser, who was similarly misled by appearances and overstated the case for the significance of Marx's method of exposition, turning it into something absolute and overlooking the subsequent analyses in *Capital*.

In any case, the commodity is truly the simplest economic form in capitalism, albeit that in the first section of Volume 1 it is presented without reference to the most characteristic commodity of the CMP, labour-power. Consequently, from the simplest form of the CMP one may be misled to "construct a model" of an economy of independent self-employed commodity producers, something which does not encapsulate the *differentia specifica* of the CMP³⁸, and which did not reflect Marx's method or intentions.³⁹

Even if we accept that the "model" of independent commodity producers is legitimate as a *first approximation to a capitalist economy* (one feature of which is the institutional independence of the producer-capitalists⁴⁰), because – for example – to establish the concept of money as general equivalent it is not necessary to refer to capitalist exploitation relations, we nevertheless believe that Marx's analysis would be more successful if he had made it clear from the outset what is involved:

The distinguishing feature of the capitalist economy is that all active agents of production are *commodity owners*, because even if they are not commodity producers (capitalists), they possess the commodity of labour power. The preliminary formulation of this position was not to constitute the slightest obstacle to the evolution of Marx's theoretical views in the first section of Volume 1 (e.g. the development

³⁶ Rancière 1996.

³⁷ Godelier 1977, p. 201.

³⁸ See also Reuten 1993.

³⁹ See Arthur 2002, pp. 33 ff.

⁴⁰ In the CMP, the capitalist is the producer of commodities (he who decides what is to be produced and how, and who owns the resulting product). Commodity production is carried out by means of the labour-power of others (and not that of the capitalist himself), which the producer-capitalist has also purchased as a *commodity*.

of the concept of the general equivalent) while at the same time it would make it clear that the only economy of generalised commodity exchange is capitalism. On this basis, the ensuing analysis of the movement of capital (M-C-M'), the production of surplus value, etc. would emerge as a logical consequence.

3.2 *The concept of fetishism and its place in "Capital"*

When he introduces the concept of the CMP in Chapters 4-6 of Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx makes it clear that the basic structural relation of the CMP is the capital-wage labour relation, whose foundation is the separation of the workers from the means of production and the transformation of labour power into a commodity.⁴¹ This relation is not just economic. It constitutes at the same time a historically specific political and ideological structure.

Domination by the CMP has as one of its necessary concomitants the establishment of the worker (on the legal-political level and on the level of ideology) as a free and equal "subject of law", with all that entails for the structural features of the state and the dominant ideology: hierarchical-bureaucratic configuration of the state apparatus, "classless" functioning of the state on the basis of the rule of law and the formal legitimacy. Correspondingly, the dominant bourgeois ideology prescribes the materiality of the civilisation of the "free human being", "natural rights and equality before the law", the common/national interest which arises from the harmonisation of individual interests, etc.

The dominant ideology therefore represents a procedure for consolidating capitalist class interests, through its materiality as an element in the institutional state functioning but also as a life practice not only of the ruling classes but also, in modified form, of the subordinate classes.⁴² In this sense, the dominant ideology is a component element of the CMP, i.e. of the *structural core of capitalist relations of domination and exploitation*. The dominant ideology conceals the class relations of domination and exploitation, not so much by denying them as by imposing them through many different practices as relations of equality, freedom and common interest. Their hard core – as pointed out by Althusser/Balibar – is the juridical ideology that is inextricably linked to the functioning of the legal system. As Marx puts it:

The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage.⁴³

⁴¹ "Capitalism is not a society of independent producers who exchange their products in accordance with the social-average labour time incorporated in them: it is a surplus-value producing economy engaged in the competitive pursuit of capital. Labour-power is a commodity" (Mattick 1969, p. 38).

⁴² See also Milios et al 2002, pp. 6-8.

⁴³ Marx 1990, p. 280.

This function of concealment of the exploitative and coercive character of social relations is called “fetishism” by Marx, in all cases where the relations of class domination and exploitation *appear*, in the framework of the dominant ideology, *in a “material” form*. Social relations like money and capital or the functions which derive from social relations (profits, interest) appear as objects (gold, means of production) or as qualities of objects (the means of production produce profit; money generates interest), and so “the forms which stamp products as commodities” appear as “natural forms” of “fixed quality”.⁴⁴

The concept of fetishism was simply introduced by Marx in the first section of Volume 1 in regard to the commodity, in order to show that “the value of the commodity no longer appears as that which it is, i.e. a social relation between producers, but as a quality of the thing, no less natural than its colour or its weight”.⁴⁵

In the course of his further investigations Marx made it clear that the concept of fetishism does not refer only to the commodity but to all forms of capital (money, means of production). In reality Marx does not expound a theory of *commodity* fetishism but a theory of the *fetishism of capital*, of capitalist relations. He introduces the *commodity as a form of capital* and as a *result of capitalist production*. In this context, he introduces also commodity fetishism as a form or a result of capital fetishism.

We perceive, then, that contrary to what many Marxists seem to believe,⁴⁶ Marx makes comprehensive reference to fetishism in the subsequent sections of his work and above all in sections of Volume 3 of *Capital*.⁴⁷ The reason for this is that the forms of appearance of capitalist relations are analysed chiefly in the third volume:

- The subordination of labour to capital imposes the capitalist as the producer of commodities and regulates exchange ratios between commodities in accordance with production costs (and not values). Profit is presented as proportion of the advanced capital, so that “surplus-value itself appears as having arisen from the total capital, and uniformly from all parts of it”.⁴⁸ This “completely conceals the true nature and origin of profit, not only for the capitalist, who has here a particular interest in deceiving himself, but also for the worker. With the transformation of values into prices of production, the very basis for determining value is now removed from view”.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Marx 1990, p. 168. See also Rubin 1972, Chap. 1.

⁴⁵ Labica 1985, p. 465. Marx detected the more general ideological consequences of the depoliticisation of Political Economy which develops also as a result of fetishism: the class-conditioned character of social relations under capitalism is thus rendered opaque (Renault 1995, p. 98). The activities of the structurally different productive practices are reduced to human activity in general and Political Economy degenerates into a narrative account of the behaviour of individuals reacting in a rational manner against predetermined situations.

Apart from his critique of the view of social relations as relations between things, Marx rejects Political Economy’s portrayal of the value form and commodity exchange as natural laws, similarly criticising its refusal to study other modes of production which illustrate the emergence of fetishism in bourgeois society (Tuckfeld 1997, pp. 42-3).

⁴⁶ Apart from the cases of Lukács and Althusser, also see, from the camp of Soviet Marxism, Klein et. al. 1988, pp. 108 ff.; from Western Marxism, Iacono 1992, pp. 82 ff.

⁴⁷ For two examples of comprehensive analysis see Godelier 1977, Rancière 1996.

⁴⁸ Marx 1991, p. 267.

⁴⁹ Marx 1991, p. 268.

- The development of credit and the split of profit into business profit (which accrues to the capitalist entrepreneur) and interest (which accrues to the lender, the money capitalist) has the following consequence:

One portion of profit, in contrast to the other, separates itself completely from the capital-relation as such and presents itself as deriving not from the function of exploiting wage-labour but rather from the wage-labour of the capitalist himself. As against this, interest then seems independent both of the wage labour of the worker and of the capitalist's own labour; it seems to derive from capital as its own independent source. If capital originally appeared on the surface of circulation as the *capital fetish, value-creating value*, so it now presents itself once again in the figure of interest-bearing capital as its most estranged and peculiar form⁵⁰.

Interest-bearing capital displays the conception of the *capital fetish* in its consummate form, the idea that ascribes to the accumulated product of labour, in the fixed form of money at that, the power of producing surplus-value in geometric progression by way of an inherent secret quality, as a pure automaton, so that this accumulated product of labour ... has long since discounted the whole world's wealth for all time, as belonging to it by right and rightfully coming its way.⁵¹

The same applies with incomes, which in fact reflect nothing other than the relations of distribution of the value produced and appear in the framework of capitalist property relations and the ideological forms associated with them as *sources* of value. Labour produces the wage, the means of production the profit and natural resources the rent:

Firstly, because the commodity's value components confront one another as independent revenues, which are related as such to three completely separate agents of production, labour, capital and the earth, and appear therefore to arise from these. Property in labour-power, capital and the earth is the reason why these different value components of the commodity fall to their respective proprietors, transforming them therefore into their revenues. But value does not arise from a transformation into revenue, it must rather be already in existence before it can be transformed into revenue and assume this form.⁵²

It becomes apparent that Marx's ideas on the fetishistic form of appearance of *capitalist relations* at the surface level of circulation (or in the context of the bourgeois ideology) cannot be conveyed adequately if the capital relation itself is not analysed, i.e. if we do not extract ourselves from the introductory framework of the first section of Volume 1 where, as Balibar points out, the critical view of fetishism represents a "preparatory dialectic", as ironic comment on the intellectual limitations of bourgeois thought. Through this comment Marx dissipates the false assumptions in the spontaneous views of economists, which correspond to "collective self-deception".⁵³

Bearing in mind that Marx wrote the first section of Volume 1 of *Capital* only to arrive at the concept of the capital, and so of the capital fetish which we have just outlined, we should appreciate that the reference to commodity fetishism does not constitute a theory of alienation presupposing an essence in the human subject and assessing the social relations as in contradiction with that essence.⁵⁴ Moreover fetishism

⁵⁰ Marx 1991, p. 968, emphasis added

⁵¹ Marx 1991, pp. 523-24, emphasis added.

⁵² Marx 1991, p. 1007.

⁵³ Godelier 1977, pp. 212-13, 221.

⁵⁴ See also Heinrich 1999, pp. 228 ff.

does not possess, as is often believed, an ideological strength: it is not the cause behind the concealment of social relations of exploitation, not does it alienate anything.⁵⁵ It consists in the examination of a *symptom*, not an ideological causality or force.

In reference to capital fetishism, Marx does not play out a simple game of subject and object. He demonstrates the various ways in which capitalist relations are imprinted on things, leaving the traces of their movement during the process of accumulation. These traces subsequently appear – in a “spontaneous” co-optation – as qualities of the things. It is wrong, therefore, to conclude that fetishism transforms matter into ideas, things into masters of human beings, subjects into objects and relations between humans into relations between things. However, it is an excessively hasty reaction to reject for that reason the problematic of fetishism as idealistic, a view put forward by Balibar, who regards as authentic the extensive-universalising interpretation of fetishism by Lukács.

In fact, even if we adopt philosophical terminology, saying that fetishism constitutes an inversion of the qualities of subject and object, it cannot be a question of a simple inversion. The social features of labour do not appear, as in a mirror image, as natural qualities of things. The image of fetishism is not the exact opposite of reality (such that an “enlightening” critique would be enough to put things right). The fetishistic image is modified in relation to the reality it reflects.

Representing the social as natural, its effect is to cause misrecognition of the social character of human relations, which are naturalised, whereas in reality they constitute the “hypostatized consequence of effaced beginnings”.⁵⁶ The “relation of things” does not constitute mere symbolism of active individuals (as with a board game when a piece of wood symbolises a certain player, such that one can always at any moment bring about a conversion to what is symbolised), but a permanent alteration in perceiving reality (what is social becomes natural).⁵⁷

Here we have to do not with equivalence, whose terms can be inverted at will. What is involved is fetishistic configuring as *part of the structure of capitalist reality* which conceals “the relationship between the social character of the commodity and the social relations mobilised in its production”⁵⁸ and it does not entail a mere inversion but is the product of a process of repression of certain elements of reality⁵⁹ and their replacement with others.

But what is decisive is that, as indicated by Rancière, the question of fetishism cannot be posed in terms of an inversion:

The relevant terms are not subject, predicate and thing but relation and form. The process of estrangement ... does not signify the externalisation of the predicates of a subject into something foreign but shows what happens to capitalist relations when they assume the most highly mediated form of the process ... The social determinants of the relations of production are thus reduced to the material determinants of the thing. Which explains the confusion between what Marx calls *material foundations* (things which exercise the function of a bearer) and the social determinants. The latter become natural *qualities* of the material elements of production. In this way the capital relation is constituted as a *thing* ...

⁵⁵ Labica 1985, p. 465.

⁵⁶ Goux 1975, p. 116.

⁵⁷ For the “two inversions” see Iacono 1992, pp. 83-7.

⁵⁸ Iacono 1992, p. 87.

⁵⁹ Goux 1975, p. 189.

The relations which determine the capitalist system can only exist under conditions of concealment. The form of their reality is the form in which their real movement disappears ... [In *Capital* Marx formulates] the theory of the process and the theory of the reasons for its misrecognition.⁶⁰

We can now return to the “weaknesses” in Marx’s analysis in the first chapter of Volume 1, where mention is made of fetishism without the capital relation itself yet having been defined. Because of this restriction Marx is obliged to refer to social relations in general or to relations between humans. (What social relations? What kind of human relations? Simply relations between autonomous commodity producers?) He does indeed record the reified forms in which these relations appear, assuming “the fantastic form of a relation between things”.⁶¹ However, neither the social relations (capitalism) nor the things have been defined.⁶²

The further we progress in this preliminary analysis by Marx of commodity fetishism, the more we come up against this absence of the concept of capitalist relations. Let us reflect further on the material element in commodity exchange. The producer fabricates something which he himself does not need (which does not possess use-value for him personally). He subsequently takes what he needs, exchanging with others the thing which for him is useless. For the individual producer to be socialised, what is needed is a thing which at the individual level is useless, and the mediation of the thing as such is demonstrated to be its (indirect) use-value for production, (its social use value). By means of the “thing” the individual producer is made part of the social mechanism of production. This analysis illustrates the relations of capitalists among themselves but it could be generalised as a description of the forms of appearance of social relations in capitalism only if one regarded labour-power too as a thing. Moreover the market is not a prime mover of, or the reason for, this socialisation. It is itself a manifestation of the CMP.⁶³

In a pertinent extract Marx makes the point that: “the capitalist mode of production, like every other, constantly reproduces not only the material product but also the socio-economic relations, the formal economic determinants of its formation. Its result thus constantly appears as its premise, and its premises as its results”.⁶⁴

It thus emerges that, seen as a whole, Marxist analysis is very far from being an ideological game of deriving everything from the simple commodity. The fetishism of capitalist relations does not consist in the mistaken view that the fate of human beings is regulated by the products of their labour, but in a necessary

⁶⁰ Rancière 1996, pp. 178, 180, 191, 193.

⁶¹ Marx 1990, p. 165.

⁶² What things? Commodities and money? The concept of money has not been introduced. Nor has the concept of the means of production which function as fixed capital. And what does labour power consist in? Is not the “reification” of social relations associated with the appearance of the exploitative capitalist community –the capital-wage labour relation– as a community of equality? After Marx had spoken about the capital relation and its forms of appearance, he could explain: “Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple *owner* of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent (...)” (Marx 1990, p. 280, emphasis added).

⁶³ “In Marx’s view, it is not the price system which ‘regulates’ the capitalist economy but, rather, unknown yet capitalistically-determined necessities of production *acting through the price mechanism* ... The market is the stage on which all competitive activities are played out. But this stage itself is set up and bound by the class nature of the social structure” (Mattick 1969, pp. 53-4).

⁶⁴ Marx 1991, p. 1011.

form of engaging with reality in a capitalist society, which will only disappear with the disappearance of capitalism itself.⁶⁵

If, however, fetishism consists in an objective-internal illusion, analysing it would require us to transfer ourselves mentally to other forms of production. This is facilitated by the comparative framework of Marx's authentic and imaginary examples.⁶⁶ But owing to its objective nature the fetishism of capital cannot be dissipated as may happen with other illusions that are structurally inessential for capitalism (e.g. the existence of God). The external/internal viewpoint of Marx (see section 1) makes it possible for the mechanisms of its creation to be demonstrated, but not for the phenomenon to be eliminated.

3.3. A comment in relation to constructivism

Fetishism, like other social constructs (gender, national identity, stigmatisation of certain individuals as criminals) is a phenomenon which can be deconstructed. Deconstruction means comprehending on the one hand their own historicity (the way in which they were constructed) and on the other the reasons for their construction, i.e. the interests to which they correspond. Nevertheless capital will go on making profit and earning interest, just as individuals cannot cease having a certain sex, national identity, criminal record, etc. even if through readings and political experiences it is established that what are represented as natural elements are the distorted forms of appearance of a social structure and so are susceptible of transformation.

Constructivism poses the question of how our representations of reality are created, i.e. what are the foundations of our relevant knowledge. This prospect transcends the traditional dilemma of objectivity or subjectivity of knowledge. It does not consider either that the subject creates the "real" object or that the object-reality is imposed on the subject of knowledge. Constructivism thus refuses to speak of reality as a datum which pre-exists but also of the subject which creates knowledge. It examines only the procedures for shaping different kinds of knowledge, through which reality is created in the form of valid assertions as to what it "is".⁶⁷

We do not propose to examine here either the different variations of constructivism or the elements deriving from it which can be summarised as a falling into the dual trap of the idealism or realism from which they are seeking to escape.⁶⁸ What is interesting is that even though Marx's method can be differentiated in general terms from constructivism, Marx adopts the constructivist viewpoint on the question of fetishism. He refuses to distinguish between truth and falsehood, ideology and truth and asserts that on the bases of certain facts concerning the structure of social production, individuals construct a conception of reality which – without being true – corresponds to that certain structure, i.e. is the only possible way of conceiving reality.

In the constructivist view, individuals' representation of reality is a construct but not something false or artificial. It is also asserted that it can be replaced in a different historical context by a representation which

⁶⁵ Godelier 1977, pp. 213-4, Balibar 1993, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Balibar 1976, p. 216, Iacono 1992, pp. 90 ff.

⁶⁷ Jensen 1994.

⁶⁸ Müller-Tuckfeld 1997, pp. 467-493.

will be subject to different criteria of truth and may be politically desirable but in any case will be equally artificial as that of the present day (e.g. the transparency prevailing in human labour relations in a Communist society will not constitute the “truth” of those relations deriving from the division of labour or a conception of “actual reality” freed from ideology, but a different way of human subjects’ conceiving social data).

The weak element in constructivism from a practical viewpoint (the theoretical awareness of being a construct changes nothing in this) is met with in Marx’s analysis of fetishism.⁶⁹ It shows its – from the cognitive viewpoint – particularly “modern” character but also its limited ideological-political significance. No ideological struggle is possible here and no transcendence conceivable within the framework of capitalism. The advantages of the analysis are to be found in its reliable knowledge of the mechanisms of conception of reality in a particular society and thus of the *constitution of subjects* in that society.

It thus becomes possible to deduce conclusions concerning the character of ideology and politics in societies where identities and differences are kept constant and the volatile data of history are naturalised for purposes of legitimisation. What has been said of constructivism in general may be asserted also of Marx’s approach: it is nothing less, but also nothing more, than a precondition for ontologised discourse to be able to be exposed to fundamental criticism.⁷⁰

3.4 *Fetishism and ideological state apparatuses*

It is a central premise of Althusser/Balibar’s critique that Marx constructs his analysis of fetishism without reference to the legal system and the ideological activity of the state. The criticism is justified given that, as previously indicated, commodity fetishism can emerge only in an already functioning capitalist society and not quasi-spontaneously from the simple act of exchange of two commodities in non-capitalist conditions.

Here emerges a major problem, given that Marx speaks of fetishism without having defined the concept of ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses, so that there is no explanation of the status of fetishism (illusion? symbol? truth?) and, as we shall see, the consequence could be a tacit insertion of fetishism in the place of ideology, thus constituting a kind of ideology without “material action” of state apparatuses.

Nevertheless, Althusser/Balibar overlook a distinctive feature of fetishism. Fetishism is the *self-generating consequence of the concealment of social relations through the operations of the economy* as such and so is not directly linked to the Ideological State Apparatuses. It is therefore proper that speaking of fetishism Marx should “forget the state” – and so provide no interpretation for the framework of creation of fetishism – but this does not amount to an argument against the analysis as such.

In two quotations from *Capital*, Marx comments that

⁶⁹ “The analysis of fetishism confirms that the mystification consists in mystification of the structure, that it is itself the existence of the structure” (Ranci re 1996, p. 191).

⁷⁰ M ller-Tuckfeld 1997, p. 487.

When the political economists treat surplus-value and the value of labour-power as fractions of the value-product ... they conceal the specific character of the capital relation, namely the fact that variable capital is exchanged for living labour-power, and the worker is accordingly excluded from the product. Instead of revealing the capital-relation, they show us the false semblance of a relation of association, in which worker and capitalist divide the product in proportion to the different elements which they respectively contribute towards its formation ... All the slave's labour appears as unpaid labour. In wage labour, on the contrary, even surplus-labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid. In the one case, the property-relation conceals the slave's labour for himself; in the other case the money-relation conceals the unrequited labour of the wage labourer ... All the notions justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalistic mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economists, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation.⁷¹

In both cases (slave ownership, capitalism) there exist in the mode of production self-generating consequences of concealment, but their tendencies are in opposite directions. This is of particular importance for the political relations of domination and the formation of ideological constructs in each mode of production. However, it is not the specific result of ideological activity but a necessity in the mode of production (which, as previously mentioned, is effectively unattainable in the absence of a functioning superstructure, although it is not created by it).

This is the time to mention an unexpected consequence of Althusser/Balibar's critique. Although they explicitly seek to take issue with the universalising outlook of Lukács, their criticism strikes just as forcefully at the comparative viewpoint of Pashukanis. If economic fetishism presupposes the state-legal framework, the derivation of legal fetishism from economic fetishism (Pashukanis) is shown to be an implementation of what is required! Pashukanis represents legal fetishism as a further consequence of Marx's critique, despite the fact that the self-same implication is already contained in economic fetishism and provides it with its grounding!

In our opinion this is not altogether damning for Pashukanis' viewpoint. If we take into account our methodological reference to simultaneous exteriority/interiority, to which any analysis of fetishism is "condemned", it becomes clear that there cannot be any absolute principle, i.e. an external point of reference which can exist prior to the appearance (on the historical and semantic plane) of all then determinants of capitalism. As a result, neither can the analysis of commodity fetishism and the capital fetishism be deduced from a pre-existent legal ideology, nor can a "pure" commodity exchange depict the structure of the legal system.

If it seems impossible to disentangle the threads of interior vs. exterior there is a way out: simultaneous analysis of the various phenomena through the concepts which emerge enriched from the dialectical method of Marx. On this point the analysis of Pashukanis retains its full force as a negative conclusion, notwithstanding his mistake to designate the economic as the source of the legal structure. The negative conclusion is that in the absence of the CMP it is impossible for there to be a private law based on specific legal codes. The inverse formulation (without private law there can be no capitalism) is logically possible but meaningless from the materialist viewpoint. It presupposes a power or will which lays down a certain

⁷¹ Marx 1990, pp. 670, 680.

law thus making feasible a mode of production! This is what proves the correctness of the priority of the economic postulated by Pashukanis, though it must become comprehensible only as a process of simultaneous formation of the interacting elements of the CMP, comprising among other things the formation of the (bourgeois) law and the ideology/philosophy which accompanies it.

3.5 Transparency of other modes of production?

On the basis of Marx's reference to the transparency of other modes of production, the impression has been created that capitalism is characterised by a unique ideological loading which prevents individuals from realising what they are doing. But it is facile to surmise that the transparency that Marx attributes to other modes of production concerns only the social relations of the division of labour and not the absence of illusions in general.⁷² In the Asiatic community, for example, the division of labour is conscious and immediate because it precedes production and decides what each individual will produce and how the product will be distributed. In the CMP, by contrast, this occurs through the market-price mechanism, i.e. "behind the back" of the active agents of production, even the most powerful of them.

However, every mode of production ends up developing self-generating forms of concealment. The difference is that in capitalism class domination is linked ideologically to individual freedom and not to other legitimations (the will of God, the superiority of certain social groups). This does not occur out of the choice of certain ideological centres but is the consequence of forms of appearance of its structural characteristics. If we consider that a class rule legitimated by the will of the "subject" himself is less transparent ideologically than a rule legitimated by external commands, the superior ideological effectiveness and stability of capitalism, when it functions through a powerful market (and so in "freedom"), is implied.

4. Fetishism and politics

The point is often made that in *Capital* Marx does not employ the concept of ideology, which was very much present in his youth works and returns as a powerful theoretical element in the later works of Engels.⁷³ In this sense the analysis of fetishism in *Capital* replaces the concept of ideology. As we have pointed out, this leads to the view that ideology is produced by the structure of commodity exchange independently of ideological instances.

The antagonism between problematics of ideology and of fetishism resulted in the formation of two different orientations in Marxism.⁷⁴ Certain theoreticians concentrate their attention on the state, analysing the processes by means of which ideologies are developed and imposed (political approach). Other

⁷² Balibar 1976, p. 217.

⁷³ Balibar 1997, pp. 174-76, Tuckfeld 1997, p. 42. Our search has shown that the word *ideology* appears only once in *Capital*, in a context which is inconsequential with respect to the main analysis (Marx 1990, p. 931).

⁷⁴ Balibar 1993, p. 77.

theoreticians attach decisive importance to the structure of commodity exchange, linking the misapprehensions and illusions of bourgeois societies to fetishism (economic approach). The former emphasise the general-universal element (the state), the latter the concrete-subjective (individuals, actions, exchange), developing a theory of the symbolic in everyday life.

The exponents of the political approach either ignore the analysis of commodity fetishism (Gramsci) or directly express opposition to it (Althusser/Balibar). The theoreticians of the economic approach starting from Lukács depoliticise the question of ideology, detaching it from specific bourgeois strategies and ending up in phenomenologies of alienation (consumerism, cultural decline, politics as spectacle, etc.) which are essentially outside the boundaries of Marxism, regarding ideological formations as a kind of cultural datum which imposes on man an inhuman life model.

There is no doubt that the fetishism of capitalist relations is not either a synonym for ideology or a more comprehensive definition for it: the approach which should be followed is the political one. But this raises the question of the influence of analyses of fetishism on the definition of ideology. There are at least three ways of defining ideology.⁷⁵

Firstly, it may be seen as an illusion which is cultivated by those in possession of power or knowledge so as to conceal actual processes of exploitation and domination. The model is that of religious ideology (respect must be shown for the dominant order of things because this is commanded by God, who is not only omniscient but also omnipotent and so will punish you if you disobey his commands). The propagation of conceptions of this kind is of much greater benefit to society's masters than the appearance of social order as a product of violence exercised by the powerful.

Secondly, ideology can be defined more comprehensively and dialectically as an illusion (also) of the producers of ideology themselves. It is much more reasonable for us to consider that the representatives of God themselves believe what they proclaim and do not pursue their activities in a spirit of cynical deceit. This postulate provides an explanation for the organic character of ideology, in contrast to the former which postulates a kind of conspiracy of the powerful, who resolve to elaborate and disseminate a lie to a huge crowd of dilettantes.

Thirdly, ideology can be defined organically, unrelated to false consciousness, i.e. unrelated to the contrast between truth and falsehood or freedom and unfreedom. If ideology expressed only violence concealed behind falsehood (or ideas corresponding to particular vested interests) it would be neither persuasive nor stable. The only way its persistence can become comprehensible is for it to be regarded as "truth", as *the truth which is both necessary and self-evident in a given society*.

The starting point must be a view of ideology as a totality of *social practices* which are produced, taught and implemented in ideological institutions openly or tacitly linked to the state and operating for reproducing the social "order". The main element is not that ideology is materially grounded nor that it is associated with various forms of indirect coercion but that the "ideas" in which it is codified are organic, i.e. they contribute to the reproduction of the relations of production. As such not only do they become acceptable to all members of society but they are experienced by them as expressions of the "truth" of social

⁷⁵ Dimoulis 2001.

life. In this sense they are the foundations of a *necessary relation between subjects and the conditions of their lives*.⁷⁶

This does not mean that it is impossible for the ideological distortion of certain view to be demonstrated, through suitable methods of criticism and comparison, to correspond to a “truth” useful for the reproduction of a system with immediate consequences for individuals’ behaviour.⁷⁷ What it does mean is that ideology is not something that can be overridden through enlightenment or dialogue and that it is intimately linked to the socially produced truth.

If we accept the third definition of ideology as a totality of “true and necessary ideas”, the fetishism of capitalist relations appears as a detail of the ideological production process. Nevertheless it makes clear the functionality of ideology, the mechanism of interiority/exteriority which enables us to overcome the antithesis between truth and falsehood by relegating it to the plane of symbolism. It makes also clear the consent created through the naturalisation of social order.

Still, the most important point is that fetishism links ideology to the subject and his subordination, which Marx conceptualises in a way entirely different to that of philosophical tradition. As has been shown,⁷⁸ it emerges from Marx’s analysis that “reality” is not only the thing, the entity, the real “sensible thing” but also the illusions, the “supersensible thing”.⁷⁹ These constitute necessary components of reality, even though they amount to a misapprehension of it and a naturalised projection of historical constructs. Just as real are the non-transparent and ideologically coerced behaviours which emerge from this reality.

In this way Marx transcends the classical distinction between the society and the individual-subject, showing that *there are no subjects outside of society but practices which constitute subjective identities on the basis of historical elements*. The subject does not constitute the world, as asserted by idealism, but the world gives birth to the subjectivity of the individual in bourgeois society as possessor of himself and his commodities in coexistence with the world of things.⁸⁰ This entails an inversion of the philosophy of consciousness and the subject.

Fetishism consists in the process of *subordination* of subjects by means of the market, which in capitalism is a site for the constitution of objects and subjects.⁸¹ Fetishism does not therefore make available interpretative schemes for politics and the exercise of power, i.e. for the production of ideology, but is one element in a theory of *ideology*, showing up the mechanisms for conceiving reality, which are linked not with subjective wills but with the overall conditions of a mode of production that are transmitted to subjects.

⁷⁶ Althusser 1977, pp. 108 ff. What we are undertaking here is a general characterisation of ideology. Its content is a different question. From this viewpoint ideology constitutes a heterogeneous totality of practices. In capitalism its basic principles correspond to the universal-emancipatory ideals (freedom, equality, democracy, solidarity, welfare) which ideological institutions subject to appropriate processing so as to neutralise their rebellious content, without depriving them of their capacity to promote social cohesion and legitimation. In the second place, ideological practices express ruling which provide direct legitimation for class differentiation (meritocracy, individuality, law-and-order) and other discriminatory elements (nationalism, racism, sexism). At a more specialised level there are ideological practices limited to particular groups and conjunctures (irrationalism, fascism, technocracy).

⁷⁷ Balibar 1994, pp. 9 ff., 55 ff., 110 ff., 126 ff.

⁷⁸ Balibar 1993, pp. 64 ff.

⁷⁹ “sensible supersensible thing”, Marx 1990, p. 163.

⁸⁰ Amariglio and Callari 1993.

⁸¹ Balibar 1993, pp. 75-6.

In the context of ideological production, fetishism provides significant raw material: it explains the “primacy” of the individual. Depending on the balance of forces at any given time, this viewpoint is either activated (neo-liberalism) or recedes into the background (dictatorial regimes of the between-war period which projected the “historical commune” or the “duty of sacrifice in the name of the fatherland”).

It thus emerges that ideological apparatuses can make political use of the mechanism of fetishism. However, in no case does fetishism ever appear “in the raw”, nor can it be present if a fully integrated ideological-political social formation does not exist. There is neither a fetishist destiny in capitalism, nor an unavoidable economic necessity which forces all individuals to act in a specific way. This is the basis of the *relative autonomy of the political level*, which provides the point of departure for revolutionary transformations.

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