Section 4: The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret

This section is written in a completely different, rather literary, style—evocative and metaphoric, imaginative, playful and emotive, full of allusions and references to magic, mysteries and necromancies. There is a marked contrast with the dull accountancy style of the previous section. This is rather typical of Marx's tactics throughout *Capital*; he often shifts linguistic styles according to the subject under consideration. In this case, the switch can create some confusion as to the relevance of the fetishism concept in Marx's overall argument (a confusion exacerbated by the fact that this section was moved from an appendix in the first edition of *Capital* to its current position—along with section 3—only in the second, definitive edition). Those interested in developing a rigorous political-economic theory out of Marx, for example, sometimes seem to view the fetishism concept as extraneous, not to be taken too seriously. On the other hand, those of a more philosophical or literary persuasion often treat it as the golden nugget, the foundational moment to Marx's understanding of the world. So one of the questions we have to ask is: how does this section stand in relation to Marx's overall argument?

The fetishism concept was already signaled in his discussion of the ways in which important characteristics of the political economic system get "concealed" or confused through the "antinomies" and "contradictions" between, for example, the particularities of the money commodity on the one hand and the universality of phantom-like values on the other. Tensions, oppositions and contradictions that have already been opened up in the text now come in for detailed scrutiny under the heading "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret" (163). Throughout the rest of *Capital*, as we will see, the concept of fetishism emerges again and again (more often tacitly rather than explicitly) as a essential tool for unraveling the mysteries of capitalist political economy. I consider the concept of fetishism, therefore, as fundamental to the political economy as well as to Marx's wider argument. In effect, it conjoins the two at the hip.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, he identifies how fetishism arises and works as a fundamental and inevitable aspect of political-economic life under capitalism. Second, he examines how this fetishism is misleadingly represented in bourgeois thought in general and classical political economy in particular.

Commodities, he begins by observing, "abound in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties":

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists . . . simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. (164–5)

The problem is that "the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material . . . relations arising out of this." Our sensuous experience of the commodity as use-value has nothing to do with its value. Commodities are, therefore, "sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social." The result is that a "definite social relation between men themselves . . . assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things." And it is this condition that defines "the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities." This fetishism is "inseparable from the production of commodities" (165).

This is so, he says, because "the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour," so that they only come to know "the specific social characteristics of their private labour" in the act of market exchange. In other words, they don't and can't know what the value of their commodity is until they take it to the market and successfully exchange it. "To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are"—note please especially the important phrase, *appear as what they are*—"i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material . . . relations between persons and social relations between things" (165–6).

So what's going on here? You go into a supermarket and you want to buy a head of lettuce. In order to buy the lettuce, you have to put down a certain sum of money. The material relation between the money and the lettuce expresses a social relation because the price—the "how much"—is socially determined, and the price is a monetary representation of value. Hidden within this market exchange of things is a relation between you, the consumer, and the direct producers—those who labored to produce the lettuce. Not only do you not have to know anything about that labor or the laborers who congealed value in the lettuce in order to buy it; in highly complicated systems of exchange it is *impossible* to know anything about the labor or the laborers, which is why fetishism is inevitable in the world market. The end result is that our social relation to the laboring activities of others is disguised in the relationships between things. You cannot, for example, figure out in the supermarket whether the lettuce has been produced by happy laborers, miserable laborers, slave laborers, wage laborers or some self-employed peasant. The lettuces are mute, as it were, as to how they were produced and who produced them.

Why is this important? When I taught introductory geography classes at Johns Hopkins, I always started off by asking students where their breakfast came from. And they'd say, "Oh, I bought stuff at the deli." But when I asked them to think back further than that, they found themselves consider a whole incredible world of laboring in radically different geographical environments and under radically different social conditions that they knew nothing about and could know nothing about from staring at their breakfast ingredients or going into the deli. The bread, the sugar, the coffee, the milk; the cups, knives and forks, toasters and plastic plates—to say nothing of the machinery and equipment needed to produce all these things—linked them to millions of people laboring away all around the world. One of the tasks of geographical education is to impart something about the variety of socio-environmental conditions, spatial linkages and labor practices involved in every aspect of daily life, down to putting breakfast on the table every day.

The students did sometimes seem to think I was trying to guilt-trip them for not paying more mind to those poor sugar-cane cutters in the Dominican Republic who earned next to nothing. When it got to that stage they would sometimes declare "Sir, I didn't have breakfast this morning!" To that I would characteristically reply that they might want to do without lunch, dinner, and supper too for a week or so just to learn the truth of the basic Marxian maxim that we have to eat in order to live.

Issues of this kind do raise moral questions. There are those who, for various reasons, propose all manner of codes of moral conduct in interpersonal relations, but who then face the dilemma of whether or how to extend that moral code into the world of commodity exchanges in the world market. It is all very well to insist on "good" face-to-face relations and to be helpful to one's neighbor, but what is the point of that if we are totally indifferent to all those whom we do not know and can never know, but who play a vital role in providing us with our daily bread? These issues are sometime brought to our attention: by the "fair trade" movement, for example, which tries to articulate a moral standard for the world of commodity exchange, and the anti-poverty movement, which seeks to mobilize charitable contributions for distant others. But even these usually fail to challenge the social relations that produce and sustain the conditions of global inequality: wealth for the charitable donors and poverty for everyone else.

Marx's point is not, however, about the moral implications. His concern is to show how the market system and the money-forms disguise real social relations through the exchange of things. He is not saying that this disguise, which he calls "fetishism" (165) (and please note that Marx's use of this term is technical and quite different from other common usages), is a mere illusion, that it is a made-up construction that can be dismantled if only we care to try. No, in fact, what you see is the lettuce, what you see is your money, you see how much, and you make tangible decisions based on that information. This is the significance of the phrase "appear as what they are": it really is this way in the supermarket, and we can observe it so, even as it masks social relations.

This fetishism is an unavoidable condition of a capitalistic mode of production, and it has many implications. For example, people do not "bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour" (166). Once again, we see that values arise out of exchange processes even as exchange relations increasingly converge to express value as socially necessary labor-time. But the producers

> do this without being aware of it. Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language. (166–7)

The dialectical relation between value formation and exchange and the immaterial, "phantom" qualities of value as a social relation could not be more starkly portrayed.

But how is this dialectic to be replicated in thought? Many of the political economists got it (and still get it) wrong, says Marx, because they look at prices in the supermarkets and think that's all there is, and that is the only material evidence they need to construct their theories. They simply examine the relationship between supply and demand and associated price movements. Others, more perceptive, came to "the belated scientific discovery that the products of labor, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labor expended to produce them." This "marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development" (167). Classical political economy did gradually converge on some idea of value that lay behind the fluctuations of the market (often referred to as "natural prices") and it recognized that human labor had something to do with it.

But classical political economy failed to understand the gap between the immateriality of values as "congealed" socially necessary labor-time and their representation as money and therefore also failed to understand the role that the proliferation of exchange played in consolidating the value form as something historically specific to capitalism. It assumed that values were a self-evident and universal truth, failing to see that

> the value character of the products of labour becomes firmly established only when they act as magnitudes of value. These magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers. Their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them. (167–8)

Thus Marx begins his attack on the liberal concept of freedom. The freedom of the market is not freedom at all. It is a fetishistic illusion. Under capitalism, individuals surrender to the discipline of abstract forces (such as the hidden hand of the market made much of by Adam Smith) that effectively govern their relations and choices. I can make something beautiful and take it to market, but if I don't manage to exchange it then it has no value. Furthermore, I won't have enough money to buy commodities to live. Market forces, which none of us individually control, regulate us. And part of what Marx wants to do in *Capital* is talk about this regulatory power that occurs even "in the midst of the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange relations between the products." Supply and demand fluctuations generate price fluctuations around some norm but cannot explain why a pair of shoes on average trades for four shirts. Within all the confusions of the marketplace, "the labour-time socially necessary to produce [commodities] asserts itself as a regulative law of nature. In the same way, the law of gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him" (168). This parallel between gravity and value is interesting: both are relations and not things, and both have to be conceptualized as immaterial but objective.

This then leads Marx directly into a critique of how bourgeois modes of thought have evolved in relationship to the proliferation of exchange relations and the rise of the money-form:

> Reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development . . . Consequently, it was solely the analysis of the prices of commodities which led to the determination of the magnitude of value, and solely the common expression of all commodities in money which led to the establishment of their character as values. It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly. (168–9)

This failure of vision on the part of the classical political economists is epitomized in the way so many of them embraced Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as a model for a perfect market economy arising out of a state of nature: Robinson, all on his own, marooned on an island, logically constructs a way of life appropriate to dwelling in a state of nature and step by step reconstitutes the logic of a market economy. But as Marx amusedly points out, Robinson, besides supposedly learning from experience, had also conveniently "saved a watch, ledger, ink and pen from the shipwreck," and immediately began, "like a good Englishman, to keep a set of books" (169–70). In other words, Robinson carried with him to the island the mental conceptions of the world appropriate to a market economy and then went on to construct a relation to nature in that image. The political economists perversely used the story to naturalize the practices of an emergent bourgeoisie.

I have long thought that the political economists selected the wrong Defoe story. *Moll Flanders* is a far better model for how commodity production and circulation work. Moll behaves like the quintessential commodity for sale. She is constantly speculating on the desires of others, and others are constantly speculating on her desires (the great moment occurs when, effectively broke, she spends every last penny on hiring a grand outfit including coach and horses and appropriate jewelry to go to a ball where she enamors a young nobleman and elopes with him that night, only to find out the next morning that he is broke too, at which point they both see the humor of it all and amicably part ways). She travels the world (even goes to colonial Virginia), spends time in debtors' prison; her fortune fluctuates up and down. She circulates like a monetary object in a sea of commodity exchanges. *Moll Flanders* is a much better analogy for the way capitalism, particularly the speculative Wall Street variety, really works.

Plainly, the classical political economists preferred the Robinson Crusoe myth because it naturalized capitalism. But as Marx insists, capitalism is a historical construct, not a natural object. "The categories of bourgeois economics" are merely "forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production." A look at this history indicates the limitations of the supposed universal truths of bourgeois theory. "Let us now transport ourselves from Robinson's island, bathed in light, to medieval Europe, shrouded in darkness." While it may be "shrouded in darkness" the social relations are obvious. Under the *corvée* system, Marx points out, "every serf knows that what he expends in the service of his lord is a specific quantity of his own personal labour-power"; feudal subjects were very aware that "the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own personal relations, and are not disguised as social relations between things, between the products of labour" (169–70). The same is true of a patriarchal rural industry of a peasant family: the social relations are transparent, you can see who is doing what and for whom.

Such historical comparisons, along with the analysis of fetishism, allow us to see the contingent, as opposed to the universal, nature of the truths laid out in bourgeois political economy. "The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production" (169). We can even finally imagine social relations organized as "an association of free men," i.e., a socialist world in which "the social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are . . . transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution" (171–2). By invoking the idea of association, Marx echoes much of French utopian socialist thought in the 1830s and 1840s (Proudhon, in particular, though Marx refrains from acknowledging so). His hope is that we might advance beyond the fetishism of commodities and try to establish, through associative forms, a different way of relating. Whether that is practical or not is a key question for any reader of Marx to consider; but here is one of the rare moments in *Capital* where we glimpse Marx's vision of a socialist future.

The fetishism of the market generates a good deal of ideological baggage around it. Marx comments, for example, on the way in which Protestantism is the most fitting form of religion for capitalism. He argues that our forms of thought—not just those of the political economists—reflect the fetish of their times; but this is a general tendency. His remarks on religion and its relation to political economic life are significant:

> Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to political economists' bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labour itself. (173–5)

To this, Marx adds a lengthy and important footnote:

> The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production; by that fact it stamps the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character. If then we make the mistake of treating it as the eternal natural form of social production, we necessarily overlook the specificity of the value-form, and consequently of the commodity-form together with its further developments, the money form, the capital form, etc. (174, n. 34)

You will err, he is suggesting, if you naturalize the value-form under capitalism, because it is then difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of alternatives.

This is what the bourgeois political economists have done: they have treated value as a fact of nature, not a social construction arising out of a particular mode of production. What Marx is interested in is a revolutionary transformation of society, and that means an overthrow of the capitalist value-form, the construction of an alternative value-structure, an alternative value-system that does not have the specific character of that achieved under capitalism. I cannot overemphasize this point, because the value theory in Marx is frequently interpreted as a universal norm with which we should comply. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard people complain that the problem with Marx is that he believes the only valid notion of value derives from labor inputs. It is not that at all; it is a historical social product. The problem, therefore, for socialist, communist, revolutionary, anarchist or whatever, is to find an alternative value-form that will work in terms of the social reproduction of society in a different image. By introducing the concept of fetishism, Marx shows how the naturalized value of classical political economy dictates a norm; we foreclose on revolutionary possibilities if we blindly follow that norm and replicate commodity fetishism. Our task is to question it.

Capitalism has no way of registering intrinsic, "natural" values in its calculus. "Since exchange-value is a definite social manner of expressing the labour bestowed on a thing, it can have no more natural content than has, for example, the rate of exchange"; it is illusory to believe, for example, that "ground rents grow out of the soil, not out of society" (176).

Bourgeois political economy looks at the surface appearance. Insofar as it had a labor theory of value, it never probed deeply into its meaning or the historical circumstances of its emergence. This leaves us with the task of getting beyond the fetishism, not by treating it as an illusion, but by addressing its objective reality (164–5, 176–7). One response is to take the "fair trade" path. Another is to devise a scientific path, a critical theory: a mode of investigation and inquiry that can uncover the deep structure of capitalism and suggest alternative value systems based on radically different kinds of social and material relations.

The two options are not mutually exclusive. A politics that deals with the conditions of labor on a global basis, developing into, say, an anti-sweatshop movement, can easily lead into the much deeper theoretical territory that Marx charts in *Capital* precisely because the surface appearance, while fetishistic, always indicates an objective reality. I recall, for example, when the students at Johns Hopkins put on a fashion show, featuring clothing from Liz Claiborne and the Gap, with a side commentary on both the items of clothing and the conditions of labor associated with their production. This was an effective way to talk about the fetishism and raise awareness with respect to global conditions, while suggesting the importance of doing something about it.

Marx's mission in *Capital*, though, is to define a science beyond the immediate fetishism without denying its reality. He has already laid a lot of the groundwork for this in the critique of bourgeois political economy. He has also already revealed the extent to which we are governed in what we do by the abstract forces of the market and how we are perpetually at risk of being ruled by fetishistic constructs that blind us to what is actually happening. To what degree can you say that this is a free society characterized by true individual liberty? The illusions of a liberal utopian order, in Marx's view, have to be debunked for what they are: a replication of that fetishism that displaces social relations between people into material relations between people and social relations between things.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROCESS OF EXCHANGE

Chapter 2 is not only shorter but easier to follow. Marx's purpose is to define the socially necessary conditions of capitalist commodity exchange and to create a firmer foundation for the consideration of the money-form that is to follow in chapter 3.

Since commodities do not themselves go to market, we need first to define the operative relationship between commodities and those who take them there. Marx imagines a society in which "the guardians" of commodities "recognize each other as owners of private property. This juridical relation, whose form is the contract, whether as part of a developed legal system or not, is a mirror between two wills which mirrors the economic relation . . . Here the persons exist for one another"—note the echo of the fetishism argument—not as people, but "as representatives and hence owners, of commodities." This leads him to make a broader point. Throughout *Capital*, "the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations," and it is "as the bearers"—please note the recurrence of this term—"of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other" (178–9). Marx is concerned with the economic roles that