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The Place of Fetishism

and

The Problem of Materialist Interpretations

by Jonathan Friedman

Introduction

The problem of the nature of fetishism, its place and function in social reproduction is of major importance for any theory of social formations and their evolution. There appears to be a fundamental ambiguity in the writings of Marx on this subject, one which is, I think, a serious obstacle to the development of such a theory. It is this ambiguity which appears to divide Marx into early and late, idealist and materialist, and which has been the source of mechanical materialist as well as hegelian interpretations.

Very recently, there have been several interesting discussions of fetishism, at a point where the question of the internal causality of social formations has for the first time become a major issue in a developing scientific approach. Althusser and Balibar on the one hand, and Godelier on the other have explored the problem from slightly different points of view. The French marxists have, more than most others, attempted to transcend the materialist/idealist opposition, but even here there has been, I think, a failure to come to grips with what is truly incompatible in Marx's writings.

The "Young Marx"

A principal theme of the 1844 manuscripts is that of alienated labor, the alienated objectification of Man's material activity and his species life as characteristic of the social state of human existence. It is not a question here of discussing the "pre-marxist" nature of these manuscripts. It appears, however, that the so-called epistemological break separating early and late Marx is somewhat exaggerated. While it is certainly true that Marx is greatly influenced by the German idealists, that he is still a philosopher and not a scientist, the particular conception of alienation developed here is
crucial, as I hope to show, for an understanding of some of Marx's latest writings (Capital, III; Theories of Surplus Value).

"Private property, as the material, summary expression of alienated labor, embraces both relations - the relation of the worker to work and to the product of his labor and to the non-worker, and the relation of the non-worker to the worker and to the product of his labor." (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, 119).

Here, in Marx's earliest attempt at materialism, we have, precisely, the heart of the matter. Private property is the expression (ideological) of the more fundamental material separation of the laborer from the product of his work. Alienation becomes the explanatory principal and not the effect of the operation of specific social forms. This analysis, based almost entirely on his understanding of capitalist society, necessarily leads to a generalization of the notion of private property which has justly been criticized (Godelier, Rationalité et irrationalité en économie, 110-112). Marx is, in fact, aware of the possibility that alienated labor in earlier societies might, for example, belong to the gods.

"To be sure, in the earliest times the principal production (for example, the building of temples, etc., in Egypt, India and Mexico) appears to be in the service of the gods, and the product belongs to the gods." (op.cit., 115).

But the gods "on their own" (op.cit. 115) do not control labor and Marx rejects the possibility that religion might serve as the basis for exploitation due to the relation which certain individuals might have to the gods.

"And what a contradiction it would be if, the more man subjugated nature by his labor and the more the miracles of the gods were rendered superfluous by the miracles of industry, the more man were to renounce the joy of production and the enjoyment of the product in favor of these powers." (op.cit.115).
On the contrary,

"If the product of labor does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, then this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker." (op. cit. 115).

In effect, alienation of labor would appear to correspond solely to the relation of exploitation although, as we saw for the gods, there is some awareness of the possibility of a more general kind of mystification of the labor process, one which is fully developed in "asiatic" social forms (Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations; Grundrisse).

We must now confront the two opposite faces of Marx's concept of alienation since they constitute form an opposition which marks all of the later works as well. On the one hand we are told that alienation is a material process or act of separation of the worker from his product, a real estrangement. Simultaneously, alienation is the appearance which labor takes on for the laborer so that,

"in relation to the worker who appropriates nature by means of his labor, this appropriation appears as estrangement." (op. cit. 119).

The different ways in which these two aspects of alienation can be combined generate all of the possible marxist interpretations of materialism.

1) material alienation → alienation as appearance
2) alienation as appearance → material alienation (fetish)
3) material alienation = alienation as appearance, i.e. alienation is constituted somehow by the dialectical unity of estrangement as practice and as ideology.

The Marx of 1844 appears to opt for the third possibility:

"Appropriation appears as estrangement and alienation appears as appropriation" (op. cit. 119).
But it is not clear how, exactly, he means the material and apparent aspects to be related. The first possibility above serves as the basis for mechanical materialism where we assume that material alienation is a sufficient cause in itself, i.e. without asking how it comes about. The second possibility which is not truly represented by any explicit interpretation attempts to answer the question, how material alienation is possible, by assuming that alienated forms themselves determine such conditions. In this form, the interpretation might seem unclear, if not idealist, but it provides a framework in which we can properly understand the last volumes of Capital while opening the way to a more consistent model of the social formation.

To return again to the "young Marx", we can find a clearer notion of alienation in his "Critique of Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy" (op.cit., 170-193) where he distinguishes between objectivity and alienated objectivity. Hegel envisages alienated consciousness (the object) as part of the dialectical reality of the subject so that the latter is "at home in its other-being as such" (op.cit.184). He thus finds "confirmation of himself in religion as religion" (op.cit., 184) in the state etc., while Marx must affirm that,

"If I know religion as alienated human self-consciousness, then what I know in it as religion is not my self-consciousness, but my alienated self-consciousness confirmed in it." (op.cit., 185 - my underline)

The distinction is crucial. Where Hegel, by reducing all reality to aspects of subjective Being, treats everything equally, Marx stresses the fundamental difference between material reality, "objectivity as such" (op.cit., 184), and "estranged objectivity" (ibid.) - not in this case to say that one is a reflection or distortion of the other but that Man can live out, materially, an alienated existence.

"The man who has recognized that he is leading an alienated life in politics, law etc., is leading his true human life in this alienated life as such." (op.cit., 184-5 - my underline)
The position, then, is that it is material life itself which is alienated in its form, that rather than simply being a misrepresentation of material life (which it must of course be since it does not correspond to the "objectivity as such" of material life), as illusion after the fact, it is the structuring or dominant aspect of this life.

The "Mature Marx"

The work of Marx as a "marxist" contains many of the same ambiguities discussed above although the discourse is completely transformed, no longer a variant of post-hegelian philosophical prose, but a more carefully framed vocabulary designed to deal with the problems of social and economic formations and their internal dynamics. The scientific works of Marx are an attempt to explain the internal structure and evolution of particular social forms, especially capitalism, and the analytical categories are naturally of a different sort than those encountered in earlier works.

We shall disregard, here, The German Ideology and the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy which have, in a handful of epigrammatic pronouncements, served as an excuse for the most vulgar kind of materialism, and we move on to the Grundrisse and Capital, especially the latter, certainly the most thoroughly scientific exercise of Marx's career.

The very first chapter of Capital, Volume I, ends with a justly famous section on fetishism in which Marx explains how the product of society's labor takes on the mysterious form of commodities. The secret lies in the simultaneous co-existence of abstract and concrete labor in the same process of production. The fact that social labor time is appropriated privately entails that socially necessary (abstract) labor is expressed as the result of point of production (concrete) labor. Where the total production of society is divided into different branches, each which is independent, the cost of social reproduction can only be expressed by the exchange of the separately produced items - hence the appearance of the commodity and exchange value which is no more than
the socially necessary labor required to produce it, socially necessary in the sense that each concrete input of labor has a cost of reproduction which depends on the labor of all the other sectors of the economy. Thus, exchange value appears as concrete labor, but it is in fact abstract labor.

"The fetishism of commodities has its origin...in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them." (Capital, I; 72).

But Marx goes on to show that in developed forms of commodity production (e.g. capitalism), exchange value becomes generalized in the form of a "general equivalent", money, which is thus seen as the necessary result of the evolution of commodity production. Money comes, in this way, to represent the general equivalence of all commodities and is thus a fetishized form of value (i.e. social labor generally as opposed to a specific magnitude implied in the notion of exchange value) which dissimulates completely its underlying reality by generating commodity prices which reify socially necessary labor as attributes of the products themselves. Thus value which appears to be a property of things is no more than a "mystical veil" (Capital, I: 80).

"There is a definite social relation between men that assumes in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things." (Capital, I: 72).

Fetishism of commodities is defined, then, as the transformation of underlying social relations of production into the form in which they appear to the subject of those relations. This is not, as Godelier has shown, a simple effect of the alienation of consciousness,

"mais l'effet dans et pour les consciences de la dissimulation des rapports sociaux dans et sous leurs apparences." (Horizon, trajets marxistes en anthropologie: 304).

Social relations of production are primary and the
fetish is only the way in which these relations appear. The distinction, then, is clear between social reality and its alienated form which is here reduced to the status of an illusory representation, or perhaps ideology (as in Althusser, "Ideologie et appareils ideologiques d'etat," La Pensee, 1970). But the problem is more complex than that - for we have taken the social relations as given. We have not asked how it is that social labor comes to be privately appropriated in the first place. We are, one assumes, not merely being technological determinists, asserting that the technical division of labor is necessary and sufficient to determine the existence of commodities. This would be to regress to the position of Adam Smith. The division of labor only specifies that there must be some social mechanism to distribute the output of the various sectors if production is to continue. In order for this to take the form of commodity production there must be a socially defined appropriation such that the product of a point of production is the property of the producer. So we have still to explain the social relations themselves.

Following Marx's argument we might schematize the order in which, in volume I, he arrives at the various fetishized categories in the following way:

```
  concrete labor/abstract labor
    ↓
  commodity/value
    ↓
  exchange value
    ↓
  money
    ↓
  Capital
```

Now when we consider capitalist relations of production themselves, i.e. the material structure which is supposed to generate the fetishized categories, we find ourselves in something of a contradiction, since capital, after all, is not simply a second or third order fetish, but the principal
relation of production in the system. How can the illusion be the material relation which is supposed to have generated it? I shall deliberately proceed slowly here so as to leave no doubts as to the nature of my argument.

Capital as Fetish vs. Capital as Relation of Production

We begin with capital as "phenomenon". It appears at first as "moneyed wealth, as the capital of the merchant and of the userer" (Capital, I:146). The difference between just plain money and capital is, according to Marx, the difference in the forms of circulation. In simple commodity exchange we have $C - M - C$ where money truly serves as a simple means of circulation, a way of changing one commodity for another. Opposed to this is the form $M - C - M$ where instead of selling in order to buy we "buy in order to sell" (op.cit., 147).

"Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital." (op.cit., 147).

But as Marx shows, $M - C - M$ would be quite meaningless if the quantity of money at the end were identical with that at the start. Why go to such trouble to do nothing? Unlike commodity exchange where one changes products which are qualitatively different, the only rationality for $M - C - M$ lies in the increase in money. Capital must be "money which begets money" (op.cit., 155). For the merchant it means "buying in order to sell dearer" (op.cit., 155), and this is just as true for the industrialist since,

"The events that take place outside the sphere of circulation do not effect the form of this movement." (ibid.)

And for pure interest-bearing capital, money simply expands by itself as "value that is greater than itself" (ibid.). The general formula of capital then is $M - C - M' (M' \rightarrow M)$. Capital is thus a particular form of value (fetishized) which has the capacity for automatic expansion.
"Because it is value, it has acquired the occult quality of being to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs." (op.cit., 154).

So much for the phenomenal form of capital as fetish. What now, we may ask, is the real material process which lies beneath all this fantasy. We have only to retrace our steps along the chain of imaginary representations in order to discover that self-expanding capital is no more than expanding real production. But expanding capital is not simply the representation of expanding production. This could indeed be the case if we were only to rely on the "deduction" of value, hence capital, from the "material" conditions of concrete/abstract labor. We would then have to explain why simple commodity producers would want to increase their output. This is all beside the point, however, since what is distinctive of capitalism as opposed to simple commodity production is the specific relation of money to labor—that which makes capital the dominant relation of production. This, of course, is the existence of the wage, the fact that capital buys labor power, paying only its necessary cost of reproduction (salary) while appropriating all the value produced over and above this. While it appears that the wage is the price of labor, a given quantity of money for a given quantity of work, the material reality is such that the total value produced by labor exceeds its wage which is only that part of the total needed for its own reproduction.

"This phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible and indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all the juridical notions of both laborer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production." (op.cit., 540).

Here again we have the fetishized form, wage, concealing the true relations between capital and labor, i.e. the class relationship. The question is whether it is merely a mystified representation of exploitation or the social determinant of the material form. The wage is a form taken by the relation between capital and labor.
and it presupposes their existence. We are not dealing here with an apparent form of an actual material behavioral relation but a relation between an already existent fetish, money, and a material entity, labor. The existence of the wage simply indicates that labor-power has become a commodity like the products of labor. But labor, of course, is not a commodity like other commodities - it is not merely the crystallization of past labor, not merely "value", but the producer of value. More precisely, labor power is value creating, but it has no value (cost of reproduction). Only the laborer has value. The commodity labor power has very different properties than other commodities, for since the worker, owner of his labor, can only reproduce himself by buying a number of other commodities, although he only produces one, his labor can only be exchanged for a general equivalent of value (convertible into any commodity), money, which thus becomes a structural prerequisite of the capitalist mode of production.

All this is a fairly straightforward argument from Capital. Let us try now to sort out the social relations of production from their fetishized forms. It is the particular way in which money-capital combines with labor which divides total value into c, v and s and which represents these as constant capital, wage, and the triad profit, rent and interest. These latter are, as Marx shows, surface categories of capitalism, misrepresentations of an underlying reality. But this reality is that money-capital in appropriating labor must misrepresent it as a commodity - i.e. through the simple act of "purchase". While it could be shown that wage, profit etc. are truly secondary categories, it is clear that money is not a mere mystified image of something more real. It is the operator of the system, determining the particular social form of exploitation as well as its misrepresentations. Thus, it is a social relation which is itself a fetish, determining the fact of exploitation as well as its appearance.

"In slave labor even that part of the working day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of existence, in which, therefore, in fact, he only works for himself alone,
appears as labor for his master. All the slave's labor appears as unpaid labor. In wage-labor, on the contrary, even surplus labor, or unpaid labor, appears as paid. There the property-relation conceals the labor of the slave for himself; here the money-relation conceals the unrequited labor of the wage-laborer."

(op.cit., 539-40).

In the above cases, the "property-relation" and the "money-relation" both dominant elements in their relations of production are at the same time misrepresentations of the material production process so that it is no longer simply a question of the fetishization, after the fact, of relations of production but of their very nature. We are a long way from the notion of fetish as a projected illusion, and we must again face the ambiguity in Marx's own writings. How is it that a fetish, which is supposedly a fantastic misconstrual or inversion of material reality which it presupposes, can simultaneously be that which determines that reality? How can capital be both the misrepresentation of and prerequisite for capitalist production? To properly answer this question we must be careful to avoid simply falling back into one of the two previous interpretations.

Fetish-Capital and Contradiction

The ambiguity, or inconsistency in Marx's presentation is accentuated when we compare the genesis of fetishized money-capital in Volume I to the actual functions it performs in the process of social reproduction as a whole (Vol. III, Theories of Surplus Value) and the central part which it plays in capitalist crises. In effect, the illusion one may have in Volumes I and II, that capital is no more than a "mystical veil", has been the foundation of the most popular interpretations of capitalist reproduction in which, by definition, there is a one to one correspondence between total real value produced and total capital. This Ricardian vision must reduce the contradictions of capitalism to a real malfunctioning of the labor process itself. Overproduction crises become identical with the keynsian insufficiency of effective demand. The organic composition of capital c/v is nothing but a monetary reflection of the technical composition. A rise in the latter logically implies a rise in organic composition and a falling rate of
profit $s/c+v$ which can only be offset by increasing more rapidly the rate of exploitation or the rate of productivity of labor $s/v$. If this were the case, then we would necessarily have to conclude that even in socialist economy there is a falling rate of profit tendency, since it depends ultimately on the technically determined composition of total value.

What is often overlooked is that the Volume III model of total reproduction abandons this view entirely and grapples with the problem of capital as such. The falling tendency of the rate of profit is no longer linked to the ratio of machines to men but to the increased productivity of labor.

"The relative decrease of the variable and increase of the constant capital, however much both parts may grow in absolute magnitude, is, as we have said, but another expression for greater productivity of labor." (Capital, III:216).

This apparent paradox in which "a rising rate of surplus value has a tendency to express itself in a falling rate of profit" (Capital, III:241) is the outcome of the cheapening costs of production and their relation to past production. The rate of profit falls even though its mass increases because,

"1)...even a larger portion of the smaller total amount of newly added labor is smaller than a smaller aliquot unpaid portion of the former larger amount and,

2) because the higher composition of capital is expressed in the individual commodity by the fact that the portion of its value in which newly added labor is materialised decreases in relation to the portion of its value which represents raw and auxiliary material,"
and the wear and tear of fixed capital. This change in the proportion of the various component parts in the price of individual commodities, i.e. the decrease of that portion of the price in which newly added living labor is materialised, and the increase of that portion of it in which formerly materialised labor is represented, is the form which expresses the decrease of the variable in relation to the constant capital through the price of the individual commodities." (op.cit., 227).

The problem is one of the relation between newly created value and old "capital value". But is this a question of real costs or of the illusion created by capital itself? If we consider the reproduction of total social capital we find a solution to the problem. Increasing productivity is nothing other than a decrease in the cost of reproduction of the total capital. It means that less input will produce the same output. But this, in effect, is just another expression of a rising rate of profit s/c+v not just of surplus value. The real paradox is that rising productivity should mean an increase in the rate of profit and yet is expressed in capitalism by a falling rate. In terms of technical reproduction it does not matter how much past labor is accumulated in its materialized form. What matters is its cost of reproduction at the present time. Increasing productivity thus decreases the cost of reproduction of means of production at an equivalent rate. But this is not what is expressed in the above passage. On the contrary, former capital values are preserved in such a way that newly added capital tends to be a smaller and smaller part of the total existing capital. These old values do not correspond to actual cost of reproduction (i.e. real value), but to the values they had when they were produced. Thus, there is a contradiction between present total value as social cost of reproduction and its apparent form as a sum of past labor inputs (past costs). When calculated according to real value it can be shown that in order for total capital to increase at all, the
addition of new capital (i.e. materialized accumulated labor) must be greater than the total value lost by the devaluation of old capital. Now the source of the contradiction is that old capital cannot be devalued in any other way than as monetary loss. Since the measure of capital is money, a given quantity paid in the past for means of production as commodity must forever be equivalent to that sum. A machine that cost a thousand dollars ten years ago cannot correspond to a lesser amount today due to decreased cost of reproduction without taking an absolute loss. In order to maintain this "value", the capitalist must in effect underpreciate his old capital at a rate equal to or greater than the rate of increase in productivity. It is significant that Marx, in the above passage, speaks primarily of prices. In a strangely anthropomorphic statement he sums up the problem.

"...its aim is to preserve the value of the existing capital and promote its self-expansion to the highest limit (i.e. to promote an ever more rapid growth of this value). The specific feature about it is that it uses the existing value of capital as a means of increasing this value to the utmost. The methods by which it accomplishes this include the fall in the rate of profit, depreciation of existing capital, and development of the productive forces of labor at the expense of already created productive forces." (op.cit., 249).

But, of course, depreciation is not an automatic process of capitalist reproduction.

"The periodical depreciation of existing capital - one of the means immanent in capitalist production to check the fall of the rate of profit and hasten accumulation of capital-value through formation of new capital - disturbs the given conditions within which the process..."
of circulation and reproduction of capital takes place, and is therefore accompanied by sudden stoppages and crises in the production process." (ibid)

The maintenance and expansion of capital value entails nothing less than the increase of fictitious value at a rate greater than the increase in real productivity, i.e. real surplus value. Overproduction is not caused in the production sphere itself but in the sphere of the realisation of value.

"The excess of commodities is always relative; in other words it is an excess at particular prices. The prices at which the commodities are then absorbed are ruinous for the producer or merchant." (Theories of Surplus Value, II:505).

Overproduction is not material overproduction. It is the overvaluation of this production. But this is only possible if money and the accumulation of money-capital is independent of, if necessarily associated with, real accumulation. In fact, it can only be the difference between the two rates of accumulation which leads to the crises. After all, capital is money-capital which can only survive if it is accumulated, and this accumulation depends in the last instance on the accumulation of real value. Thus, linked to the overvaluation (underdepreciation) of capital is,

"a continuous plethora of money-capital in definite phases of the cycle, and this plethora must develop with the expansion of credit. And simultaneously with it, the necessity of driving the production process beyond its capitalist limits must also develop: over-trade, overproduction, and excessive credit." (Capital, III:508).

Money and money-capital are not the inverted representations of real processes that they appear to be in certain passages. Marx makes this abundantly clear in criticizing
Ricardo for treating money "merely as a means of circulation" (Theories of Surplus Value, II:504) equal to the labor value for which it is exchanged. On the contrary, it is the forms through which capital passes in social reproduction - specifically, as money and as real production, which are mutually contradictory, because they are,

"in the first place necessarily complementary and secondly, despite this intrinsic and necessary correlation, they are distinct parts and forms of the process, independent of each other, diverging in time and space, separable and separated from each other." (Theories of Surplus Value, II:508).

Here there is a definitive statement of Marx's position with respect to the place of money in the process of capitalist reproduction. It is, far from being imaginary, the dominant element in the relations of production, that which determines the material form, and its internal properties are the source of the main contradiction in the mode of production, the contradiction between forces and relations of production.

If we reconsider now the section on commodity fetishism we find that the transformation labor value exchange value is not really a total misrepresentation of reality. Exchange value does in fact correspond to social labor. If it takes the form of commodity value, the quantity remains a correct representation of embodied social labor. But exchange value and value are not the phenomenal forms of capitalist structure, they do not appear at all in daily existence. It is the next step of the chain, money and the derived forms, money-capital and commodity prices that are the phenomenal categories of capitalism and these, as we have shown are not fetishized representations of a deeper process but the operant categories of the system. The actual false appearances of the system are profit, wage, interest and rent, categories which have no autonomous material existence but which are in effect mystified representations, truly imaginary forms (ideological) generated by the capital-labor relation.
Let us try to put this into some logical order. Exchange value and value represent the true content of social labor in the disguised form of commodities. However, this content has no phenomenal reality. Rather, it "takes" the form of price which can only be arrived at by passing through the third order representation "money". Now if money = value, i.e. corresponds to social labor, then price = exchange value. This is the Ricardian view rejected by Marx. It is not the case in capitalism. Capital is money which grows, ultimately by employing labor to produce real goods over and above its cost of reproduction, products which are sold as commodities with a price, thus converted into more money than at the start. Capital is money that can exploit labor in order to reproduce itself on an expanded scale - there is no deeper aspect to this relation. On the contrary, it is the attributes of privately owned money-capital which misrepresents the exploitation of labor in terms of wage, surplus value as profit etc. We might represent the generation of capitalist categories in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIVATE MONEY CAPITAL</th>
<th>Private titles to social product and labor power in the form of money</th>
<th>Commodity Price</th>
<th>Wage</th>
<th>Profit Interest Rent</th>
<th>Capitalists' Means of Production + Pictitious Capital</th>
<th>MISREPRESENTATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FREE LABOR</td>
<td>Private appropriation of social labor by non-producers</td>
<td>Value + Exchange value</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>S + C</td>
<td>REAL PRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where, then, is fetishism in all this? We might be tempted to treat the categories labelled "misrepresentations" as fetishes, but this leaves unexplained the nature of capital itself. It is always claimed that relations of production are material, as if they could be defined behavioristically. This avoids the problem of the
form of these relations by simply positing the form as illusion. This is how Marx gets into the ambiguity in the first place, by trying to show that the fetish can be deduced from something deeper, more material. But it is clear that Marx implicitly rejects this notion in the later volumes of Capital where, in fact, it would have completely prevented him from explaining the contradictions of reproduction. To see capital as the same type of category as profit, wage etc. would be a serious mistake since the latter are derived from the former which is also the dominant relation of production. Marx states quite clearly, however, that capital is in essence a fetish which is mostly plainly seen in its purest form.

"In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, is brought out in its pure state."
(Capital, III:329).

This pure form (M-M') specifies the nature of capitalist relations. It determines the way in which labor is exploited, the specific structure of the capitalist class relation. And yet it is fetish, not because it is the misrepresentation of some other activity, but because it is opaque with respect to what it does. It is the use of money to buy labor which creates the illusion that labor-power is a commodity. It is the imposition of one set of properties upon another, where the first do not correctly represent the second which are in this case the material relation between worker and non-worker. If capital is fetish it is because its internal properties do not correspond to the functions it performs in the material process of reproduction, not because it is a deformed image of that process.

If we consider this in the light of the 1844 manuscripts, Marx's early endeavour takes on a new significance with respect to Capital. In the early work Marx attempts to show that Man is not only alienated from his own labor, but that he leads a life which is alienated, that is, his daily existence consists of categories which are the false appearances of his material activity. In the years following the manuscripts, Marx rejects Feuerbachian discourse, alienation becomes first "the phantoms formed in
the human brain", the "ideological reflexes and echoes" of "material life-processes" (The German Ideology, 38), and then, fetishism, where the appearance aspect is stressed while the lived aspect disappears. Finally in the later volumes of Capital we find implied a new notion of fetishism in which the fetish determines the form of the relation of production but where its own internal properties mystify that relationship. Here again, the alienation is lived out, not as a moment in some general process of estrangement, but as the very form taken by the dominant social relation, as the result of the determination of material production by a fetish.

Fetishism and Materialist Interpretations

Althusser and Balibar made serious attempts to clarify a number of the concepts of marxist theory, and they have consciously tried to avoid the pitfalls of both hegelianism and economism. But their handling of the problem of fetishism and relations of production leads to a rather confused proliferation of concepts culminating in the very contorted notion of "structural causality".

In Lire Le Capital, Althusser tries to show that Marx's "immense revolution theorique" (Lire Le Capital, II, 161) was that he replaced the former notion of expressive causality (essence --- phenomenon) adopted by Hegel and the "young Marx", by the notion of structural causality. He replaces the concept of "Vorstellung" by that of "Darstellung", where in the latter as opposed to the former A does not represent B, but rather B is represented in A.

"Dans la Darstellung, au contraire, il n'y a rien derrière." (op.cit.,170).

In an attempt to transcend the subject/object, essence/appearance concepts implied in Marx's analysis of fetishism, he generalizes the notion of structural causality in a very interesting way.

"celà implique que la structure soit immanente à ses effets au sens spinoziste du terme, que toute l'existence de la structure consiste
Here the essence/appearance opposition is not merely bypassed, it is collapsed into a single category, "reality" - thus giving rise to the new "scientific" distinction knowledge of reality/reality. "Essence" is reduced to the explanatory model, the understanding, of reality. This neatly disposes of fetishism as we have discussed it, i.e. as an internal property of the relations of production. If capital is no more than the sum of its effects, if its properties are not more than the relations of production which they determine, then we must have some difficulty in accounting for the fact that capital as money-capital has properties which are not equivalent to its material effects, and that this is the principal reason why crises can come about. Money-capital determines the form of capitalist exploitation but it is not identical with it. While we might certainly agree that a theory accounting for capitalist reproduction would explain its structure, its "inner reality", this cannot dispose of the possibility that the operation of the system, its global material structure, is determined by a substructure which is simultaneously a misrepresentation of that system.

What is crucial here is that this point of view entirely eliminates the question of the place of fetishism within the relations of production themselves. This is evident in a later provocative discussion where ideology is seen to represent,

"dans sa déformation nécessairement imaginaire, non pas les rapports de production existants....mais avant tout le rapport (imaginaire) des individus aux rapports de production et aux rapports qui en dérivent."

("Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état", La Pensée, 151:26).

Ideology is defined in terms of a false imaginary relation of individuals to their relations of production, but the production relations themselves are not discussed.
except to say that they determine the place of individuals in the process of material production.

In Balibar we have the clearest formulation of the separation of relations of production from the fetishized form which they take. These relations are definitively divided into two parts, real relations of appropriation, and their juridical or superstructural expression, a difference between possession and property. In capitalism, the economic relations can properly be characterized by their juridical expression since the latter is no more than an extension of the former (Lire Le Capital, 2nd edition, II:121). The real economic relation however, is determined within the work process itself.

"Seul le travail 'productif' determine un rapport de production et le travail productif ne peut être défini en général par le rapport de l'employeur au salarié, rapport entre 'personnes': il suppose que soit prise en considération le sphère économique où il se situe (sphère de la production immédiate ou la plus-value trouve sa source), donc la nature matérielle du travail et de ses objets, donc la nature des moyens de travail auxquels il se combine." (op.cit., 122).

It appears here that the real economic relation is none other than the material exploitation of the worker by the capitalist - and not the form, capital, which must then be seen as some expression of that relation. But Balibar is more subtle than that, for it is not always the case, as in capitalism, that the property form corresponds to the real process of appropriation. Their non-correspondence is equivalent to a separation in time and space of work and surplus work (i.e. between v and s or between c+v and s). Furthermore, this difference in the relations of production has serious consequences.

"La non coincidence des deux process de travail et de surtravail impose l'intervention des raisons extra-économiques pour que le surtravail soit effectivement accompli." (op.cit.II,107).
Thus in feudalism where possession does not coincide with property, the extra-economic relation providing the lord with his surplus is said to be political, i.e. the master/servant relation which enforces the dependency of the serf exterior to the sphere of immediate production. Balibar would like to say that it is the non-coincidence of property and possession which causes the political relation to become dominant. But when we consider now the relation of real appropriation we find that the incongruity between possession and property is itself the effect of landed property. Rent after all is the form, the specific "economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of direct producers" and which "determines the relationship of rulers and ruled" (Capital, III:791). But this rent, determined by the relation of landed property to landless peasants, defines a necessary servitude in which possession is granted to the laborer in exchange for a payment over and above his cost of maintenance. Thus the relation of production implies that the laborer is not free, that the property relation must appear simultaneously as a relation of master to servant. Balibar's argument is taken directly from Marx's own language in which the political relation

"grows directly out of production itself and in turn reacts upon it as a determining influence." (op.cit., 791).

There is something of a confusion here, due in part to a certain lack of clarity in Marx's text, but which should not occur if we take into account the rest of the passage. There is no question but that the appropriation of surplus in the form of rent is determined by the property relation. This relation is the primary operation in the economic process.

"It is unpaid surplus labor for the 'owner' of the means of production which here coincide with land, and so long as they differ from it are mere accessories to it." (op.cit., 790).

The political relationship between master and serf is secondary, even ideological, in the functional sense that it is only a reinforcing aspect of the primary relation.
Balibar has, I think, misunderstood Marx's admittedly unclear statement. The relation between ruler and ruled which "grows out" of production, which in fact grows out of the dominant relationship of production (landed/landless) in turn has a "determining influence" on those relation of production. This is not to say, as Balibar thinks, that the economic structure determines that some other non-economic "instance" is to be dominant in production.

As the bottom of this confusion lies an inadequate distinction between function and form, or, rather, between institutional structures and the material structure which results from the combination of institutions in the process of social reproduction. What Balibar takes for the non-correspondence between real appropriation and property is, materially, simply the fact that the output of the immediate process of production is in the hands of the producer so that the economic relation that expropriates surplus must operate after the fact of production - while in capitalism the entire output of production belongs immediately to the owner of the means of production so that in global terms, the reproduction of the producer depends on the redistribution of part of the total product.

But it is the capitalist property relation that determines that the total output belongs to the owner immediately, and it is the feudal property relation that determines that only surplus will be taken in the form of rent. In other words it is the fetish, the property structure itself, which implies the degree to which possession and property coincide.
Thus, when Balibar concludes that the feudal mode of production is governed by a non-economic relation, this is entirely on the basis that exploitation occurs (temporally) after the fact of production, that it is not the immediate process of work which is mystified but some other moment in the process of reproduction. But the fact is that if this moment determines the distribution of social labor, if it is the effector of exploitation, then it must be a relation of production, and therefore, supremely economic. It is a contradiction in terms to insist that a non-economic relation can dominate the entire functioning of the economy. On the contrary, an element is only economic, a relation of production, because it does dominate the economy. Capital is not intrinsically "economic". It becomes so because of its place in social reproduction. If money were only used in children's games it would not be economic. It is only in this framework that we can understand why Marx could call capitalism the "religion of everyday life". (op.cit.830).

For Balibar, the dominance of the fetish in the relations of production, in their very form, becomes a whole new problem. Structural causality, seen as Marx's theoretical revolution becomes a complex variant of mechanical materialism.

"Dans les structures differentes, l'économie est déterminante en ce qu'elle détermine celle des instances de la structure sociale qui occupe la place déterminante." (Lire Le Capital, II:110).

But as economic relations are, as we have seen, the material relations determined by a given fetishized structure, since in each case it is from this structure that they are derived, the above statement amounts to saying that the material aspect of the relations of production determines the form which it takes. This is no more than a highly involuted attempt to combine the two faces of Marx's ambiguity:

1) material structure causes the apparent social form which it takes for the actors.
2) social form is identical with the lived estrangement of the labor process.

These two incompatible notions are combined in such a way that the social form which is lived is determined by the economic relations to which it gives that form. Since the actual nature of structural causality is not defined we must assume that this is a real positive determination, in which case it is clear that we are dealing with a variant of economism.

Mechanical Materialist Causality

- superstructure
  - apparent form
  - fetish

"economic" relation of production

Structural Causality

- superstructure
  - political ideological

dominance of instance "x"

"economic" relation of production

or more generally:

Form

Content (material)
It is a variant which saves the causality of the purely material base on the superstructure while giving lip-service to the obvious fact that it is a given social relation in social reproduction which determines the form of material life.

Balibar provides us with a striking example of the mechanistic implications of such an approach. Comparing the asiatic mode of production to the capitalist he discovers that the product of labor belongs automatically and by definition to the "oriental despot" just as it belongs automatically to the capitalist. Thus, in the two forms, "qui sont aussi éloigné que possible chronologiquement, géographiquement etc., et bien que les agents qui entrent dans le rapport soient par ailleurs différents (ici capitaliste et ouvriers salariés, la Etat et communautés), une même détermination directe par les fonctions du proces de production produit les mêmes effets de fétichisme: le produit appartient de lui-même à l' 'unite' supérieure parce qu'il apparaît comme l'oeuvre de cette unite." (op.cit., II:104 -my underline.)

The economic cause or determination of these "identical" effects is the fact that in both systems, real appropriation and property coincide with each other. But here we fall into a clearly vulgar materialist argument. Nothing should be more evident than that the coincidence of property/possession is not the cause but the effect of other relations which are entirely different in the two modes of production. It is because, in the first case, that the despot represents the "higher unity" and, in the second, that the capitalist buys labor as a commodity, that "property" and possession come to coincide. Balibar has simply inverted the real direction of determination.

The attempt to reduce production relations to pure materiality, relegating the rest to a number of super-structural instances whose place in reproduction is determined by this materiality becomes a complex elaboration on
a mechanical materialist model. Instead of a causal
arrow going directly from forces of production through
to ideology (this is rightly rejected), we start with
another structure, relations of production, but not in
their totality, only in their material aspect. It is
as if we started from the fact of exploitation to explain
the specific form which it took. In his most recent
article ("Sur la dialectique historique", La Pensée, 170,
1973), Balibar goes so far as to reject Marx's concept
of fetishism as ideological, replacing it instead with a
material theory of ideological relations (following
Althusser) of the following form:

relations of production \(\rightarrow\) ideological relations ("material") \(\rightarrow\) ideological effects

material relations \(\rightarrow\) juridical moral religious political esthetic \(\rightarrow\) fetishized objects

Here the commodity as fetish, capital as fetish is
definitively split into the process of material production
and other processes - which may be material in the sense
that they correspond to a particular social practice -
but which are only secondarily derived from production,
presumably by the circular arrow of structural causality.
The core of the effort is plain - the attempt to expur-
gate all traces of non-materiality from the relations of
production, moving them higher up into the superstructure.

The Place of Fetishism in the Social Formation

Two of the most important articles to appear in
recent years are those by M. Godelier who first suggested
the way in which Marx's notion of fetishism could be used
to arrive at a deeper understanding of the function of
social relations in pre-capitalist formations. His point
of view is in rather strict adherence to Marx's position in the section on commodity fetishism. Thus he sees this as the basis for a general theory of ideology, a theory of the

"effet dans la conscience de la structure sociale." ("Fetichisme, religion et théorie générale de l'idéologie chez Marx" in Horizon, trajets marxistes en anthropologie, 340).

Thus, the fetish becomes a second order ideological construct albeit a necessary one, since it maintains the relations of production by dissimulating their real structure.

Godelier's work, however, displays the same kind of ambiguity that we find in Marx except that the positions are more clearly developed. Unlike the notion of fetish as ideology stressed in his two recent articles (Horizon, Trajets marxistes en anthropologie, 294-342), some of his other work implies the kind of conclusions reached here. A fundamental argument in Rationalité et irrationalité en économie is that socio-economic structure is essentially an unintentional, i.e. blind structure whose properties determine the objective laws of development of the mode of production. He also states that a relation of production can be any institution which functions as such. This is the crux of his argument that kinship is not simply an ideological phenomenon in primitive societies. More generally, the fetish moves closer to its object.

"le fantasme est lui-même part du contenu de ces rapports sociaux et non pas seulement le reflet aberrant et derisoire d'une réalité qui existerait en dehors de lui." (Horizon, xiii).

Here, the fetish is indeed a property of the social relation, but it is only one of its properties. Thus he can continue to speak of the fantasmatic form taken by the relations of production, and fetishism can still be
Relations of Production as a Fetish

We have suggested several times that social relations of production are themselves fetishes, that they do not adequately represent their material effects - not because they are illusions engendered by the material level, but because they are opaque with respect to that level. Thus, fetish is not ideology. It is the dominant structure of social reproduction. The problem with the term, of course, is that a "fetish" always seems to be the end product of the process of fetishisation, a mis-representation of some other object or situation, i.e. a derivative phenomenon. I would suggest that we keep the idea of fetish as a mis-representation but that we drop the corresponding verbform notion as its necessary precondition. In this way, a fetish can be described as a social form whose internal properties do not correspond to its effects in the process of material reproduction. We have seen this for capitalism. Capital is only money. It becomes a relation of production by dominating the labor process, by buying labor-power which it necessarily represents as a commodity. The mis-representations of the material process of exploitation is the result of the imposition of capital on labor. Further this misrepresentation is the very form taken by the act of exploitation. It is because in given historical conditions social reproduction must take place through the act of buying labor that the appropriation of surplus takes the ideological form of profit, rent and interest. The only structural prerequisites for this are a population divided into holders of money and holders of nothing. Money-capital is not an illusion based on real production, it is the social precondition for it. The structure of money-capital - the pure form, M - M', determines the internal rationality of capitalist production, but it does not represent the real processes involved in production. It is blind to its own effects, and it is this very blindness which is the structural foundation of the contradiction between forces and relations of production. If capital were merely the result of fetishisation, then such a contradiction would be theoretically impossible.

The concept of opacity is a fitting one to characterize the nature of relations of production, and it forms a significant opposition with Marx's concept of "transparency" which is the prerequisite for the operation of a communist economy, i.e. where the social mechanisms which distribute
social labor contain within them the true representation of their material effects. A fetish is simply a structure which does not contain this information. The notions of class consciousness and mystification refer to the manner in which the members of a society accept the information in the fetish-structure as reality or reject it in favor of a view which takes account of the structure as well as its material effects.

Relations of production come to be fetishes because fetishes come to be relations of production, because a social structure or element comes to dominate the process of reproduction, an element whose internal properties do not correspond to its material functions. As long as history is a blind process, it is only natural that social relations of production are to be fetishes. The categories of social structure are not invented by the conditions of production, they are not expressly adaptive mechanisms, there is no automatic information feedback from the conditions of reproduction to the structure that dominates them. It is only in this way that men can make their own history without knowing it. Marx attempts to explain the emergence of capitalism in terms of the structural transformation which occurred in the breakdown of feudalism, the freeing of money-capital and of labor. Real consciousness of the relations between social forms and their conditions of reproduction played no part in the transformation. It was, rather, a question of the internal dynamics of the structures themselves as they were lived in the real but hidden process of material existence.

I return now to the example of the asiatic mode of production in order to give a clearer idea of the kind of argument presented above. It has been said that the category "higher unity" from which all production appears to be derived is an ideological correlate of the relations of production. But the internal structure of the "asiatic" relation reveals it to be more.

In Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, Marx stresses the continuity between the tribal economy and the asiatic state, insisting on the fact the foundation of the latter remains "tribal or common property" (op.cit., 70). In another work I attempted to show how the tribal structure
of consciousness into the process of social reproduction in such a way that real material relations can be controlled in a manner commensurable with human capacities.

**Conclusion**

The place of fetishism, then, is in the center of the social formation. It is the dominant structure of social reproduction, and from the broadest anthropological perspective it is clearly in contradiction with the biological capacities of the species. A regression to a kind of automatic instinct-like behaviour is a tragic compromise for a species whose brain structure, unlike that of any other species, permits the possibility of continuous adaptation to and development of the rest of nature. The survival of man, as dominant species in the ecosystem, depends on his using his conscious capacities to control his own and therefore nature's reproduction. The regression into fetish-forms of existence can only lead ultimately to biological contradiction, since with the development of the forces of production, new blind modes of production do not just destroy themselves, but become increasingly capable of destroying the natural system of which they are a part and which is necessary for their biological survival. Marx's "anthropological" vision of 1844 is similar to this. It is the "humanism" of this broader perspective which, modified by the scientific analyses of Capital, can serve as the basis for a theory of social reproduction, one which correctly locates the present class struggle in the larger anthropological context of the problem, fetishism, which has always confronted the human species, which gives this struggle deeper historical significance and sheds some light on the necessary path to the socialism and communism of the future.

1. Althusser's argument for Marx's "theoretical revolution" in Pour Marx and Lire Le Capital, discussed later in this paper.

2. The first chapter of The German Ideology and the famous introduction to the Critique of Political Economy have been the foundation for the mechanical materialism of Plekhanov, Wittfogel, Harris etc. These passages, while having been taken out of context, might, in fact, easily be interpreted in the most vulgar fashion.

3. See Marcus, L., Dialectical Economics, forthcoming, for a full development of the Volume III model.

4. C. Bettelheim, "Variations du taux de profit et accroissement de la productivite du travail" Economic Appliquee, i. The author demonstrates quite rigorously that, calculated correctly, the total capital value in an expanding system remains constant even though the quantity of output increases, because the rate of accumulation is exactly offset by the rate of devaluation, i.e. the rate of increase in productivity.

5. I use the second edition of Balibar's essays because there are significant alterations in the text.


7. While, what are normally categorized as "tribes" display a great degree of variation, there is some evidence that they form a "system of transformations" which might be generated by a single historical model, or by a single dynamic model with different constraints of reproduction (Friedman, 1972). The argument here assumes a minimum of features and the tribal structure described might be considered a kind of zero point or theoretical origin. In different conditions of reproduction, however, there is every reason to
believe that the historical transformation would be other than that given here.

8. See Firth, The Work of the Gods in Tikopia for a specific example of this very general phenomenon.

9. See Friedman (1972). The production of slaves, by debt and capture, and their reintegration as a lower class, are instrumental in the development of the class structure, but they are already a part of the functioning of the tribal economy in its period of expansion, and the form taken by the class relation is entirely determined by the tribal structure.