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# The Role and Place of ‘Commodity Fetishism’ in Marx’s Systematic-dialectical Exposition in *Capital*

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## Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the literature on Marx’s systematic-dialectical method through a critical reading and discussion of the significance and presentational ‘architecture’ of the section on commodity fetishism in the dialectical sequence of form-determinations in *Capital*. In order to undertake this task, the paper firstly explores the content and expositional structure of the first three sections of Chapter 1 of *Capital*. This sets the stage for a methodologically-minded close examination of Marx’s presentation of the fetish character of the commodity, which shows that there is a precise systematic sequence which gives unity to the flow of his argument within the section on ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret’. The conclusion is that only through a proper grasp of the dialectical method can the full systematic significance and implications of Marx’s account of commodity fetishism be uncovered.

## Keywords

commodity fetishism – systematic-dialectical method – subjectivity – value-form

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the publication of works such as Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*<sup>2</sup> or Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*,<sup>3</sup> the emphasis on Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism has been a hallmark of critical traditions of Marxism. In effect, according to those traditions, commodity fetishism is the cornerstone upon which the understanding of Marx's mature works as a *critique* of political economy (as opposed to political economy or economics) depends.<sup>4</sup> While there is no doubt that the fetishism of commodities plays a fundamental part in Marx's critique of political economy, the question is, once we accept this premise, what are the precise meanings and implications of such a notion for the scientific comprehension of capitalist society as a whole, and, more concretely, for the proletarian political action through which the movement of capital realises its own annihilation? Here, the mere reference to the centrality of the historicity of bourgeois social forms and their fetishistic

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1 In keeping with the Fowkes translation utilised for the preparation of this article and with its widespread use in the literature, I will use the terms 'commodity fetishism' and 'fetish-like character of the commodity' interchangeably, in both cases to refer to the essential substantive meaning of the said phenomenon, namely, the real inverted existence of the social determinations of privately-undertaken human labour as an objective 'supersensible' power of its product (i.e. value). This primordial determination and its social constitution should be distinguished from a more concrete aspect of this very same inverted consciousness of the commodity producer, which I also discuss below: when she faces this process of inversion in an already constituted form or as a *fait accompli*, it takes the *purely social* power of exchangeability of the commodity as if it were a *natural property* of the product of labour. In other words, it is also an apparent, mystified or illusory consciousness. In this sense, some recent commentators (Bellofiore 2014; Ehrbar 2010; Schulz 2012) have perceptively pointed out that the standard English translation is rather problematic. In effect, it overlooks that Marx systematically assigned the term 'fetish-like character' (*Fetischcharakter*) to the essential determination consisting in the real inversion of human social powers as attributes of things, while he reserved the term 'fetishism' (*Fetischismus*) for the illusory consciousness that naturalises this social power of the commodity. Now, although I do not dispute the pertinence of these exegetical observations, they are in the end of a *terminological* nature. In my view, as long as the content and meaning of each aspect of the phenomenon under consideration are clearly established and defined (as I believe this paper does), and given its usual adoption in contemporary Marxist debates to refer to its essential substantive determination, the continued usage of the admittedly-problematic term 'commodity fetishism' is harmless.

2 Rubin 1972.

3 Lukács 1971.

4 Clarke 1991; Holloway 1992; Postone 1996; Backhaus 2005; Reichelt 2005.

character does not suffice to grasp the critical and revolutionary nature of the critique of political economy.

A first issue that arises therefore concerns the varied substantive understandings of commodity fetishism in the history of Marxism. In a recent doctoral dissertation, O'Kane offers a concise and useful typology of the different meanings attached to the term 'fetishism' in the diverse readings and traditions of Marxian theory.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, there is the interpretation of 'fetishism as false consciousness', which can be traced back to the 'orthodox' or 'traditional' Marxist reading by Kautsky,<sup>6</sup> but which can be also found in more recent times among so-called 'analytical Marxists'.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, there is the Althusserian conception, which, in its earliest version, quite simply rejected Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism (insofar as it was seen as a residue of the Hegelian influence on the young Marx).<sup>8</sup> Later, Althusser qualified his early assessment and came to accept the notion of fetishism as a false conception that 'veils' the system of capitalist social relations with a relation between things.<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, this typology identifies the notion of 'fetishism as reification', which can be traced back to the main exponents of the so-called Western Marxist tradition (in particular, Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and Weberian readings of the Frankfurt School).<sup>10</sup> Fourthly, there is the interpretation of 'fetishism as alienation', which characterises the classic Marxist Humanist conception that emerged after the publication of the *1844 Paris Manuscripts* and which stressed, against Althusser's 'epistemological break', the continuity between the 'Hegelian young Marx' and the 'mature' Marx of *Capital* (for instance, the work of Marcuse, Lefebvre and Fromm). Finally, O'Kane identifies a fifth strand that he labels 'fetishism as value', and which broadly corresponds to the tradition of value-form theory or 'form-analysis'. In this approach, commodity-fetishism is understood as the historically-specific inverted social constitution of thing-like forms of social mediation that configure an impersonal 'system of objective compulsion', and which reduces the existence of human beings to its personifications.

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5 O'Kane 2013, pp. 16–23. Dimoulis and Milios 2004 provide an alternative typology based on a critical but sympathetic rethinking of the Althusserian reading.

6 Kautsky 1903.

7 Elster 1985.

8 Althusser 2001.

9 Althusser and Balibar 1970.

10 For a critique of these Weberian understandings of commodity fetishism, see the seminal work by Clarke 1991.

This article offers a detailed critical reconstruction of Marx's account of commodity fetishism which, broadly speaking, can be substantively located within this latter tradition that reads section 4 of Chapter 1 of *Capital* as a critical investigation of the social constitution of value-objectivity out of the social form of capitalist social relations of production. Although I believe that the paper does also provide a novel and original reading in this respect (specifically, concerning the connection between value and consciousness), it is not in the substantive issues surrounding commodity fetishism that the main contribution of the paper lies. Rather, my aim is fundamentally at the level of *method*. More concretely, the paper discusses the precise role and place of commodity fetishism in light of Marx's *systematic-dialectical* exposition in *Capital* and argues that the specific form of the dialectical method is fundamental in this respect. Yet both aspects are immanently related: a proper grasp of the substantive *content* of commodity fetishism can only result from a correct understanding of the very *form* of Marx's process of cognition.

The need to reconsider Marx's presentation of the commodity-form in Chapter 1 of *Capital* through a reassessment of his dialectical method (in particular, its connection to Hegel's *Science of Logic*) has been widely recognised by a growing number of scholars, especially within the ranks of the so-called 'New Dialectics' or 'systematic-dialectical' approach. In effect, the last 20 or 25 years have witnessed a renewed interest in Marx's dialectical method and its implications for value theory.<sup>11</sup> Although there are various particular controversies over the precise nature of this connection, most contributions agree that the structure of the argument in *Capital* is organised in a dialectical form which, at the very least, can be said to draw formal inspiration from the general form of movement of categories that Hegel deploys in his *Logic*. Thus Marx's presentation is seen as involving a (synthetic) movement from the more abstract or simple form-determinations of the subject-matter (namely, capital) to the increasingly more concrete or complex forms in which it moves and eventually manifests in 'empirical' reality, thereby culminating in the intellectual reproduction of capital as the unity of those many determinations. Inasmuch as the transition from one economic form to the next is seen as being driven by the development of the contradictions immanent in each of them, their relationship is generally deemed as internal and grounded in dialectical necessity, in contrast to the externality and unmotivated shifts that inevitably result from the use of formal logic.

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11 See, among others, Murray 1988; Reuten and Williams 1989; Smith 1990; Moseley (ed.) 1993; Moseley and Campbell (eds.) 1997; Arthur 2002; Albritton and Simoulidis (eds.) 2003; Moseley and Smith (eds.) 2014.

Now, despite all the light that these works have cast on the form of Marx's argument, I think that two important gaps can be found in this literature. In the first place, they have been mainly focused on the *synthetic* aspects of Marx's dialectical presentation (i.e. on the exposition of the dialectical movement from the 'abstract to the concrete'). In this sense, it could be argued that this literature has glossed over the peculiar role of the *phase of analysis* in Marx's dialectical investigation generally and in his presentation in *Capital* in particular.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, these scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the *specific form of the analytical process within dialectical thought*.<sup>13</sup> In the second place, as far as I am aware, works coming from the 'New Dialectics' approach, which are those that emphasise the dialectical structure of Marx's argument (and hence the necessity of the sequence of form-determinations), tend not to discuss the precise *systematic* role and place of commodity fetishism in the exposition in *Capital*. In other words, although these works obviously do highlight its centrality for the critique of political economy, they do not thematise the question of the systematic necessity for the dialectical presentation in *Capital* to address, at the specific point of section 4 of Chapter 1, the fetish-like character of the commodity. Moreover, and in stark contrast with the attention given to the order of Marx's dialectical exposition in the first

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12 The distinction between analysis (in the sense of dissection of the 'whole' into 'parts' or 'identification of differences') and synthesis (in the sense of reconstitution of the 'unity' of the whole) is not peculiar to dialectics. As I argue below, what sets the latter apart from formal-logical methodologies is the specific *form* taken both by the analytical and synthetic processes in dialectical thought. Zelený 1980, Chapter 10, provides a concise discussion of the different meanings of analysis and synthesis in science and philosophy, which also traces back their intellectual lineage.

13 Starosta 2008. These other aspects have not been entirely absent in the literature (see, for instance, Murray 1988, pp. 148–50). However, they came up in the debate among 'new dialecticians' relatively late (Murray 2002; Reuten 2000) and have not been pursued any further until recently (see Reuten 2014, who does address in great detail the connection between analysis and synthesis, and that between inquiry and presentation, in systematic dialectics). In this sense, Ollman's criticism of the systematic-dialectics literature, that these authors tend to focus one-sidedly on Marx's method of *exposition* at the expense of his method of *inquiry*, is, to some extent, pertinent (Ollman 2003, pp. 177–80). However, it seems to me that Ollman is somewhat unfair in his claim that the systematic-dialectics approach *restricts* Marx's method to a strategy of presentation and simply neglects it as a mode of inquiry. Be that as it may, it is my view that compared to the light thrown on the synthetic aspects of Marx's method of presentation, the nature of the relation between analysis and synthesis in the presentation and the way in which this relates to the formal determinations of the dialectical inquiry, have not been explored with the same depth and clarity.

three sections of Chapter 1, most works seldom inquire into the existence of a systematic sequence which would give unity to the flow of his argument *within* the section on ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret’.<sup>14</sup>

My aim in this article is therefore to contribute to filling these gaps in the literature through a critical reading and discussion of the significance and presentational ‘architecture’ of the section on commodity fetishism in the dialectical sequence of form-determinations in *Capital*. In order to undertake this task, the paper firstly explores the content and expositional structure of the first three sections of Chapter 1 of *Capital*. This will set the stage for the discussion in the other sections of this article, in which I offer a methodologically-minded close examination of Marx’s presentation of the fetish character of the commodity. As the discussion will hopefully make evident, only through a proper grasp of the dialectical method can the full systematic significance and implications of Marx’s account of commodity fetishism be uncovered.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Heinrich 2012, in his introduction to the three volumes of *Capital*, is a partial exception. Thus, he offers a very detailed and rigorous commentary on each paragraph of the section on commodity fetishism which, at least implicitly, implies the acknowledgement that there is a systematic guiding thread structuring the flow of Marx’s argument. However, he does not connect the latter with the form of motion of the dialectical presentation. Furthermore and oddly enough, without offering any explicit reason he introduces the commentary on the section on commodity fetishism after his discussion of Chapter 3 on the functions of money. This undermines his otherwise insightful attempt at showing the systematic connection between the first two chapters of Volume I. As argued below in this article, the section on commodity fetishism is a necessary mediating link between the commodity and the action of commodity-owners in the process of exchange. Still, the rigour of Heinrich’s commentary markedly sets it apart from David Harvey’s popularising reading in his recent *Companion to Marx’s Capital* (see Harvey 2010). In this recent book, Harvey characterises the writing style of the section on commodity fetishism as ‘literary ... evocative and metaphoric, imaginative, playful and emotive, full of allusions and references to magic, mysteries and necromancies’, which he contrasts with the ‘dull accountancy style of the previous sections’ (Harvey 2010, p. 38). Although probably a humorous remark in a book based on lectures to postgraduate students, this characterisation of the passage from the ‘language of commodities’ to the ‘language of human beings’ has the unintended consequence of trivialising (and thus obscuring) the systematic necessity of such a transition and, as a consequence, the significance of commodity fetishism in the dialectical development of form-determinations.

15 These claims are more fully elaborated in Starosta 2016.

### Outline of the Structure of Marx's Presentation in the First Three Sections of Chapter 1 of *Capital*<sup>16</sup>

#### *The Phase of Analysis in Sections 1 and 2 of Chapter 1 of Capital*

In the *Marginal Notes on Adolf Wagner* Marx states unambiguously that he starts the exposition in *Capital* with the immediate observation of the commodity as simplest *concretum* in which capital-determined social labour is expressed in order to develop the real determinations specific to this social form.<sup>17</sup> In Marx's own words, he begins with the immediate observation of 'the simplest social form in which the labour-product is presented in contemporary society'.<sup>18</sup> From this starting point, Marx proceeds by taking the individual commodity 'in his own hand' and analysing 'the form determinations that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity'.<sup>19</sup> These form-determinations Marx initially discovers by looking at the use-value of the individual commodity, which in capitalist societies acts as bearer of a second, *historically specific* attribute of the products of labour, namely, *exchange-value*. Marx's exposition thereby initially revolves around the (dialectical) *analysis* of that historically specific power of the commodity.

As happens with every real form, the first thing he encounters when facing the exchangeability of the commodity is its *immediate manifestation* – the quantitative relation 'in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another'.<sup>20</sup> The next step in the analysis of exchangeability is the uncovering of the *more abstract form* (hence the *content*) behind that specific formal attribute of the commodity, this being the only way in which we can penetrate through the concrete form in which an immanent determination presents itself. Thus, the further analysis of the commodity reveals that exchange-value is actually the 'mode of expression' or 'form of manifestation' of a content distinguishable from it – value – the substance of which resides in the abstract labour congealed or materialised in the commodity.

Having discovered the materiality of the qualitative content of the 'ghostly objectivity' of value, Marx briefly discusses its quantitative determination: the *magnitude* of value is determined by the *socially-necessary* labour time required for the production of commodities. This means that the objectification of the abstract character of labour is socially represented in the form of value

16 This section summarises arguments elaborated more fully in Starosta 2008.

17 Marx 1975, p. 198.

18 Ibid.

19 Marx 1976a, p. 1059 (translation amended).

20 Marx 1976c, p. 126.

only inasmuch as it satisfies two conditions: first, that it corresponds to the technologically normal conditions of production prevailing in society,<sup>21</sup> and, second, that it can satisfy a social need,<sup>22</sup> regardless of whether these needs arise from ‘the stomach or the imagination.’<sup>23</sup>

As argued elsewhere, in opposition to the claims of a great deal of contemporary literature on Marx’s theory of the value-form, I think that the (analytic) search for the specific determinations of the commodity is evidently not achieved with the discovery of abstract labour as the substance of value.<sup>24</sup> Quite to the contrary, that very specificity seemed to have slipped through Marx’s fingers. In effect, although he found the specific attribute of the commodity in its value, when he moved to account for its substance he ended up with something which bears no specifically-capitalist character: ‘merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour, i.e. of human labour power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure.’<sup>25</sup> This is the reason

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21 Marx 1976c, p. 129.

22 Marx 1976c, p. 131.

23 Marx 1976c, p. 125. For a more extended discussion of the meaning of ‘socially necessary labour’, see Kicillof and Starosta 2007a.

24 As a reaction to the ahistorical, Ricardian reading of Marx’s account of the value-form, the ‘new consensus’ tends to see abstract labour as a purely historical, specific social form. See, among others, De Angelis 1995; Postone 1996; Reuten 1993; Arthur 2001; Bellofiore and Finelli 1998; Kay 1999; Saad-Filho 1997; Mohun and Himmelweit 1978; de Vroey 1982; Eldred and Haldon 1981; Bellofiore 2009; Heinrich 2009; Mavroudeas 2004; McGlone and Kliman 2004; Roberts 2004. I have developed a more extended critique of this new consensus in Kicillof and Starosta 2007a and 2007b. Here I can only offer some very brief remarks on this issue. Abstract labour is a generic material form, a ‘productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc.’ (Marx 1976c, p. 134). What is specific to capitalist society is the role it plays by being determined as the substance of the most abstract form of objectified social mediation, namely: value. In other words, at stake here is the *movement of the contradiction* between the generic, physiological materiality of abstract labour and its historically-specific *social* determination as the substance of value deriving from the *private* character of labour in capitalism. See also Carchedi 2009, Carchedi 2011a, pp. 60–74, and Robles Báez 2004, for a similar argument. Murray 2000 comes very close to recognising this through the distinction between ‘physiological’ abstract labour and ‘practically abstract’ labour, thus shifting his thinking from the earlier perspective adopted in Murray 1988. The debate on the nature of abstract labour has not been settled and has continued in more recent times. See Bonefeld 2010 and 2011; Carchedi 2011b; Kicillof and Starosta 2011.

25 Marx 1976c, p. 128.



why Marx still carries on with the analytic search for the '*form determinations* that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity'.<sup>26</sup>

This leads Marx's dialectical analysis to give closer scrutiny to the *labour that produces commodities* in the following section of Chapter 1. As any attentive reader could tell, the analytic process continues and it is only in *section 2 on the dual character of labour* that Marx finally finds the historically-specific form of social labour that produces commodities and, hence, value. The commodity, Marx eventually concludes, is the objectification 'of mutually independent acts of labour, performed in isolation'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it is the 'labour of private individuals who work independently of each other',<sup>28</sup> or *private and independent labour*, which constitutes the specifically-capitalist form of labour or productive activity. The analytic process completes the search for the specific determinations of the value-form by revealing that the attribute of general exchangeability of the commodity springs from the abstract or general character of socially-necessary *privately performed* labour materialised in it. The value-form, then, becomes known in its essential determination as the *objectified or reified expression of the social character of the individual labour of private and independent producers*. Its objectivity is thus revealed to be wholly social, without an atom of 'matter' entering into it,<sup>29</sup> i.e. it is the purely social representation of the 'physiological' materiality of objectified, privately-undertaken socially-necessary abstract human labour that constitutes its substance.

Now, as is widely acknowledged in the literature, the sequence at that initial stage of Marx's argument (i.e. in the course of the transition from section 1 to section 2 of the first chapter) consists in going from *form* to *content*. However, the crux of the matter does not simply reside in realising this (which, at any rate, is explicitly announced by Marx himself in the first pages of Chapter 1), but in grasping the precise way in which properly dialectical analysis discovers the content behind the form and, therefore, their inner connection.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the conventional scientific method, dialectical thought analyses a concrete form by, first of all, facing it as embodying a qualitative potentiality for transformation, and second, by grasping that qualitative potentiality as the concrete form in which a more abstract form realises its own qualitative

26 Note that had abstract labour as such constituted the specificity of value-positing human action, Marx's analytical search would have come to an end.

27 Marx 1976c, p. 132.

28 Marx 1976c, p. 165.

29 Marx 1976c, p. 138.

30 Iñigo Carrera 2012.

potentiality, that is, its real necessity. Thus the dialectical ideal appropriation of the universe of different real forms does not proceed through an identification of the distinctiveness of forms on the basis of the degree of repetition of certain attributes. Rather, it analytically separates the different forms by discovering as *immanent* in a particular concrete form the realised potentiality of another real form, which is abstract with respect to the first one, but concrete with respect to another form of which it is the realised potentiality. For instance, value, as the specific immanent qualitative potentiality of the commodity as a generally-exchangeable ‘social thing’, is discovered as the common attribute that is immanent in the *singular* quantitative exchange relation between two different use-values that constitutes the immediate appearance of exchange-value. The latter is thereby revealed as the necessary concrete form in which value is immanently realised. In turn, value is uncovered as the concrete form in which the potentiality of privately-performed socially-necessary abstract labour as a productive action (i.e. as an individual expenditure of labour-power immanently determined as an organ of the social metabolic process) is realised in its result or product.

Thus, while conventional scientific method grasps the general determination of real forms as immediate affirmations and hence self-subsistent entities, the distinctive mark of the process of analysis in dialectical research is to grasp, *in the same analytic movement*, both the concrete form under scrutiny and the more abstract one of which the former is the developed mode of existence. In other words, dialectical thought grasps each form as the affirmation through self-negation of another, more abstract one (hence, as subjects of their own movement). This analytical procedure must be then renewed for those other more-abstract forms, but now treated as the real concrete form whose inner content the research is trying to uncover. Only once all those inner form-determinations have been uncovered through analysis should the investigation undertake the ‘return journey’ through which those abstract determinations, now in their self-movement, lead to ‘the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought’.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Synthetic Phase of Ideal Reproduction Proper*

In a nutshell, the discussion above showed that, strictly speaking, the first two sections of Chapter 1 of *Capital* are not part of the *synthetic* movement of the

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31 Marx 1993, p. 100. Note that this specific form of motion of analysis and synthesis in dialectical thought applies not only to the moment of exposition or presentation but, primarily, to the moment of inquiry as well. See Iñigo Carrera 2013.

dialectical exposition but constitute its *analytic* prelude. As we have seen, the analytic stage only separates a concrete form from a more abstract one, whose realised potentiality it carries within itself in the form of its own immanent potentiality. In this sense, the analytic stage does not ideally reflect the immanent self-movement of the object under consideration. It is therefore not about the *why* but only about the *what*. Evidently, since the apprehension of real forms according to their relative degree of abstractness or concreteness ideally expresses the objective necessity (the real relations) residing in the object and is not the product of the subjective caprice or imagination of the scientist, the mere reference to the 'what' carries implicitly some hint of the 'why'. But this something is no more than, as it were, a 'pointing out', an external observation. The actual exposition of the unity between content and form – hence its explanation – takes place in the *synthetic* phase of *reproduction*, which faces the challenge of precisely showing that movement which the analysis was incapable of unfolding: the necessity of the realisation of that (more abstract) determination in its more concrete forms of existence.

In the specific context of the structure of Chapter 1 of *Capital*, this synthetic movement consists in ideally following the realisation or actualisation of the attribute of exchangeability (i.e. value), which is the potentiality that was analytically uncovered as immanent in the commodity. From then on, the commodity ceases to be grasped in its exteriority as an 'inert' external object and the exposition starts to follow its self-movement as the subject of the development of those determinations previously discovered through analysis into ever more concrete forms.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, this reproduction only starts in section 3 of Chapter I, entitled 'The value-form, or exchange-value' and consists of the unfolding of the content of this movement albeit as spoken in 'the language of commodities'.<sup>33</sup>

In effect, insofar as value is the purely social power of the commodity, it cannot be immediately expressed in its sensuous corporeal materiality. As the capacity of the commodity to be exchanged for other different commodities, value can only be manifested in the social relation of exchange between commodities. Therefore, the value of a commodity necessarily expresses itself only in the use-value of the commodity that is exchanged for the commodity in question as its equivalent. In this way, value takes the concrete shape of exchange-value as its necessary form of manifestation. In its most developed form, value acquires independent existence as money, and the expression of

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32 Iñigo Carrera 2014.

33 Marx 1976c, p. 143.

value in the particular commodity acting as money becomes determined as price. The opposition inherent in the commodity is thus externalised through the doubling of the commodity-form into ordinary commodities and money. The power of direct exchangeability of commodities negates itself as such to become affirmed as a social power monopolised by the money-form.

It is in the course of the movement of this ideal reproduction, when seen from the point of view of its *qualitative content*, that the answer to the questions which the analytic stage was impotent fully to provide is given. In other words, it is the development of the expression of value that unfolds the explanation as to *why* the objectification of the abstract character of privately performed labour takes the social form of value or, to put it differently, why private labour is value-producing. In a nutshell, the issue comes down to the fact that it is only the expression of value which progressively reveals the problem that the commodity-form of the product of labour is meant to solve. I am referring to the mediation in the establishment of the unity of social labour when performed in a private and independent manner. And since this unity becomes condensed in the money-form, it is the unfolding of its determinations, synthesised in the peculiarities of the equivalent form and derived from its general determination as the form of immediate exchangeability, that provides the answer to the question as to why privately performed socially-necessary abstract labour must produce value.

In sum, in capitalist society the unity of social labour thus becomes socially represented in the form of the particular private product that the rest of commodities separate as their general equivalent and which eventually ossifies in the money-form. In tracing the genesis of the latter through the ideal reproduction of the expression of value, the synthetic stage of the dialectical exposition thereby positively unfolds the determinations of that which the analytic process could only *point out*. Namely, that the value-form of the product of labour is the materialised general social relation of human beings in the capitalist mode of production and, therefore, the reified *social subject* of the *form* in which the social process of production of human life attains unity in this historical stage of its development.

It is only at this juncture that Marx introduces the fundamental discussion of the fetish character of commodities. The question that immediately arises, and which is hardly addressed in the literature, is *why only and precisely then?* I think that the answer to this question is inseparable from the issue about the determinate content of the section on commodity fetishism and its place in the overall structure of Marx's exposition in *Capital*. The object of the next section, then, is to proceed to deal with these questions.

### The Immediate Object of Exposition of the Section on Commodity Fetishism and its Systematic Place and Significance

In order to clarify the issue, let me get straight to the point and pose the fundamental question which underlies the proper comprehension of the systematic place and significance of the section on commodity fetishism in the structure of Marx's presentation, namely, from the point of view of the dialectical method, what is the immediate object of the exposition in that section? As Iñigo Carrera points out,<sup>34</sup> those pages fundamentally develop the determinations of the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer. Or, better stated, they unfold the determinations of the alienated consciousness as such which, therefore, becomes *explicitly expounded* as an alienated consciousness. This is because, in reality, the whole of Chapter 1 (and, actually, the whole of *Capital*) has as its object the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer in the different, ever-more-concrete modes of existence (both the forms of *objectivity* and *subjectivity*).<sup>35</sup> However, the text starts out not with the alienated

34 Iñigo Carrera 2007, pp. 260–1.

35 See Starosta 2016, Chapter 6, for an in-depth elaboration on this admittedly polemical claim. For the sake of brief further clarification, however, a few additional words are in order. If the value-objectivity is, as argued below, the fetishised form in which the private producer unconsciously posits her own immanent social determinations as apparently autonomous powers of the product of labour, it follows that the further concrete forms assumed by the value-form, which is what the rest of *Capital* unfolds, must also be further developments of this initial simplest determination. Now, insofar as with 'the metamorphosis of commodities' the latter develop and acquire new determinations, this process 'transforms the commodity-owners as well, and alters the social role they play in relation to one another' (Marx 1987, p. 371). Thus, as this simplest objectified form of social mediation (the commodity/value) self-develops and changes, commodity owners 'who represent these changed relations, acquire new economic characteristics', i.e. they 'change skin' and emerge from the circulation process wearing different 'character masks' from those with which they entered. More specifically, as the systematic-dialectical presentation progresses, it reveals that the commodity with which it started actually proves to be the most abstract form of capital as self-valorising value. Its personification, the 'commodity producer', is concomitantly transformed. In the circulation process, commodity-owners become differentiated into owners of money-as-capital (capitalists) and owners of the commodity labour-power (wage-labourers). Upon the purchase of the labour-power of the doubly-free labourer, these two personifications establish an antagonistic direct social relation in the immediate process of production throughout the duration of the working day, in which the worker renders surplus-labour and valorises capital under the command of the capitalist. In other words, the capitalist personifies

consciousness in and for itself, but with its most general *objectified* form of existence, namely, the commodity. Although the commodity *will prove to be* the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer, it is not yet known to be such at the beginning of the dialectical presentation. The commodity, not its producer, is thus the immediate subject of the determinations unfolded in the first three sections of Chapter 1.

Conversely, in the section on commodity fetishism, Marx turns his attention to the reasons why the products of private labour appear, to the producers themselves, as bearers of those reified powers whose autonomised self-movement he ideally reproduced through the expression of value contained in the exchange-relation. Having discovered behind the power of exchangeability of commodities the historically specific form in which capitalist society resolves the social organisation of the organic unity of human life, the exposition needs to explain why the producers, the actual subjects whose material reproduction is at stake, must represent that process in their consciousness in such a mystical and fetishistic form. The transition is, then, from the *formal* subject of the value-determinations, i.e. the commodity, to the *material* subject, i.e. the human individual.

In this respect, it could be said that the section on commodity fetishism opens a kind of new presentational (sub)node, which, in turn, will prove to be a necessary mediation for the determinations to be unfolded in Chapter 2 on the process of exchange. This is the case insofar as the section on commodity fetishism focuses on the determinations of the consciousness of the commodity producer analytically separated from the human action it regulates in the process of exchange. In other words, it expounds the determinations of consciousness mainly with regard to its *form*. Once Marx has established the historical formal determinations of human consciousness, in Chapter 2 he can then follow the mode in which the latter moves in the realisation of the general social relation, i.e. in its unity with action as conscious practice in the sphere

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the privately-undertaken conscious organisation and direct control of the labour process performed by the wage-worker, whilst the latter personifies its execution proper. Thus, the simplest *systematic* (i.e. not historical) figure of the commodity producer with which the presentation started, which concentrated the personification of the unity of the conscious organisation and execution of privately-undertaken social labour, 'doubles' into capitalist and wage-worker, with those two roles in the direct production process now 'polarised' between these two different 'character masks'. The simplest determinations of value-positing are thereby not abstractly negated at the level of abstraction of the capital-form but 'sublated' (i.e. preserved through their self-negation). In sum, and in response to one of the referees' comments, what is said of the 'commodity producer' applies to all participants in a commodity-producing society.

of circulation (which is the phase of material reproduction in which human individuals *directly* confront, albeit as 'representatives of commodities', the manifestation of the general unity of social labour *indirectly* established behind their backs).<sup>36</sup>

As corresponds to the nodal structure of Marx's exposition, he starts the section on commodity fetishism with an immediate observation: 'A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing'.<sup>37</sup> However, very quickly he develops the analytic movement which brings us to the inner determinations of the commodity discovered in the previous section. In effect, Marx points out that although it immediately appears as a trivial thing, the commodity is in reality an entity full of metaphysical subtleties, a sensible/suprasensible being with the fantastic power of being transformed into another use-value without even touching its materiality.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, at this stage of the process of cognition, we already know where to find the source of such mysticism; it must derive from the commodity-form itself, i.e. from its character as the reified mediator in the establishment of the unity of the social character of private labour. In the commodity, all the qualitative and quantitative determinations of social labour appear to the material subject of this activity as objective attributes of its product.

Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself. The equality of the kinds of human labour takes on a physical form in the equal objectivity of the products of labour as values; the measure of the expenditure of human labour-power by its duration takes on the form of the magnitude of the value of the products of labour; and

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36 And even at that level, the alienated action that personifies the realisation of the necessity of the commodity to establish an exchange-relation is still abstract and is part of what Marx calls, in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the 'theoretical phase of circulation' of commodities, 'preparatory to real circulation' (Marx 1987, p. 303), which can only take place once, 'as a result of establishing prices, commodities have acquired the form in which they are able to enter circulation' (Marx 1987, p. 323). By this Marx means the ideal reproduction of the determinations of the circulation of commodities which constitute the premises of its actual movement. This 'theoretical circulation' comprises Chapters 1 and 2, and the first section of 3 (the functions of measure of value and standard of prices). Only then is the actual circulation of commodities reproduced in thought, revealing the subsequent functions of money not as its preconditions, but as its concrete forms.

37 Marx 1976c, p. 163.

38 Ibid.

finally the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour.<sup>39</sup>

In the passage above, Marx is simply bringing together the results reached by the ideal reproduction of the form-determinations of the commodity in the previous three sections of Chapter 1. However, the dialectical exposition has so far uncovered this essential content of the commodity-form purely in terms of the search for the latter's immanent social determination as an exchangeable entity. As I shall argue in more detail below, the form-determinations of the commodity must now be revisited from the perspective of the human being, which in section 3 has been implicitly discovered as the actual material subject of those determinations formally carried by the product of labour. In doing so, the dialectical presentation will shed new light on that very content itself. By way of a momentary analytic 'detour' from the synthetic movement of the presentation, which penetrates further into the inner determinations of the fetishistic appearance of the commodity as an autonomous subject with the social power to establish the exchange-relation, the value-form is revealed as the inverted representation, in the consciousness of the human being, of the social character of her own activity. In other words, the commodity proves to be the alienated mode of existence of the private producer's consciousness of the immanent unity of social labour of which her own activity is but an organic moment. It is the transposed form in which the producers consciously experience the indirect nature of their general social relation in this mode of production, projecting it as a social power external to their own individuality.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore 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. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social ... [The value-relation] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.<sup>40</sup>

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39 Marx 1976c, p. 164.

40 Marx 1976c, pp. 164–5.



Now, before proceeding with this reconstruction of Marx's further unfolding of the determinations of the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer, it is worth probing deeper into some methodological aspects of the way in which his exposition approaches the determinations discussed just above. As we will see, the peculiar structure that he gives to the presentation disrupts the fluidity of the pure synthetic ideal reproduction of the commodity-form. This has several consequences that could result in a misunderstanding of the systematic sequence of form-determinations by inattentive (or rather, uncritical) readers. On the one hand, and more generally, it could give the impression that the section on commodity fetishism actually has no determinate *systematic* place and significance whatsoever, simply being a 'sociological' analysis which constitutes the basis of Marx's 'theoretical political economy',<sup>41</sup> or a 'philosophical' excursus which strays away from the exposition of the unfolding of the 'economic' determinations of the value-form.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, we will see that this presentation inevitably leads to repetitions of points already made earlier on in Chapter 1, which can generate the appearance of an inverted order of presentation of certain determinations. Thus, Marx interjects as part of the development of the alienated consciousness as such *repetitions* of arguments he had already developed when he was effectively presenting the determinations of the commodity as the general social relation (the objectified social being, so to speak). That many of those passages just reinstate points already made earlier is evidenced by the way in which Marx introduces them:

*As the foregoing analysis has already demonstrated, this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them.*<sup>43</sup>

A further point to note in this regard is that one of the particular features of Marx's presentation in the section on commodity fetishism is that, unlike the analytic passage from the form of value to its substance between sections 1 and 2,<sup>44</sup> or the synthetic return to the unity of that substance with its form of existence in section 3,<sup>45</sup> he does not *explicitly inform* the reader about the content of the presentational movement that he is undertaking (e.g. the passage

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41 Rubin 1972.

42 Balibar 2007.

43 Marx 1976c, p. 165; my emphasis. Heinrich also notes that with that introductory line Marx refers to the content of the previous sections (Heinrich 2011, p. 176).

44 Marx 1976c, p. 128.

45 Marx 1976c, p. 139.

from value and its monetary mode of existence to the consciousness of the commodity producer), or about the formal necessity of that step in the dialectical sequence of form-determinations. However, this does not mean that there is no immanent necessity structuring the flow of the argument, as implied by Reichelt's claim that Marx tended to 'conceal' the dialectical method in the published versions of the critique of political economy (and especially in the second edition of *Capital*) in order to popularise the exposition.<sup>46</sup> As Iñigo Carrera points out,<sup>47</sup> what Marx removed from the exposition, in contrast to that of earlier manuscripts like the *Grundrisse*, are the explicit reflections on the direction that his ideal reproduction of the immanent unity of content and form of a determination should take. In fact, Iñigo Carrera continues,<sup>48</sup> those remarks are, strictly speaking, external to the ideal reproduction of the inner determinations of the object of cognition, which is what the dialectical method is all about. In this sense, the exposition in the published versions of the critique of political economy could be said to be actually *improved* from the point of view of the dialectical method, since it focuses more 'purely' on the 'immanent life of the subject matter' without any alien additions. It is down to the critical reader to recognise and make explicit those formal-methodological aspects which are only implicit in Marx's presentation. By contrast, this could, of course, lead other 'inattentive' readers to think that the section on commodity fetishism has no systematic place in the dialectical presentation, however fundamental it may be in other respects.

Another related issue concerns the point made above about the 'disruption' of the fluidity of the systematic ordering of form-determinations, partly entailed by Marx's idiosyncratic exposition in the first chapter of *Capital*, but partly a reflection of the nature of the subject matter under consideration itself. In effect, one of the peculiar features of Marx's exposition of the determinations of the commodity-form in sections 1 to 3 is that when analytically moving to the more detailed discussion of 'labour' as the human action that posits the value-form (more specifically in section 2), he treats it, as it were, in a purely 'objective' fashion, simply as the source or substance of value, i.e. as the content of the attribute of general exchangeability of commodities. The consequence of this is that nothing is said at that stage about what labour generically is, namely, the specifically human form of the life process and, in that determination, the *conscious* action of the working subject. In Marx's exposition, the explicit positing of this generic determination of labour as conscious

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46 Reichelt 1995, 2005 and 2007.

47 Iñigo Carrera 2013, p. 65.

48 Iñigo Carrera 2013, pp. 65–6.

metabolic interaction with 'external' nature occurs only in Chapter 7 on 'The Labour Process and the Valorisation Process'.<sup>49</sup> However, even there he develops the generic determination of consciousness as the form of organisation of human productive action rather one-sidedly, that is, only in relation to an abstractly-presented individual character of labour without regard to its immanent social determinations.<sup>50</sup>

Be that as it may, the important point for the purpose of my argument here is that in the first three sections of Chapter 1, labour as subjective activity (hence consciousness) is entirely omitted from Marx's presentation. Although no more than an 'informed guess', a plausible explanation for this is that Marx wanted to stress the *real automatism* characterising commodity production as the general social relation. For this reason, he structured his exposition purely around the movement of the commodity, that is, around the simplest form of the labour *product* and the explanation of its power of exchangeability as its historically-specific objective attribute (the value-form). Thus, instead of directly starting with 'individuals producing in society' as he had earlier

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49 Here I would like to argue that there is an element of flexibility in the dialectical presentation. Although overall form-determinations tend to follow a 'strict' systematic sequence, there are certain aspects of the object of cognition which, in principle, could be addressed at different points of the presentation. In those cases, it is down to the researcher to judge where a particular determination fits better. An example of this is Marx's postponement of the treatment of the transfer of the value of the means of production until Chapter 8. Although there is no strict systematic necessity not to address the different roles of past and new labour in the process of value-formation at the level of the commodity-form (since all the determinations presupposed by that qualitative difference have been unfolded at that stage), there are formal reasons that make it more sensible to leave it until later on in the dialectical presentation. Arguably, the distinction acquires full significance in relation to the determination of the diverse elements of the labour process as modes of existence of the production of *surplus value*. Dead labour now becomes a necessary form that capital must assume in order to absorb the only direct source of its valorisation (living labour), but in which its generic determination as a self-expanding magnitude is immediately negated. It becomes posited as *constant* capital in opposition to the only part that does attain self-valorisation, i.e. *variable* capital. From the perspective of the simple production of commodities, the explicit differentiation between the modalities in which the diverse functional elements of the labour process enter into the formation of value of the final product is less relevant. What fundamentally matters for the simple commodity producer is that her commodity's value is realised in full in order to be able to buy all the other use-values she needs for the production of her life. The division of the total socially-necessary labour into past and fresh new living labour expended is not of the essence.

50 Fitzsimons 2012, pp. 43–4.

announced in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*,<sup>51</sup> in *Capital* Marx took as his point of departure the *thing* that appears as the immediate carrier of that power to establish the unity of the general social relation when the human individual does not consciously organise the latter as her personal attribute.<sup>52</sup> What follows from that starting point is the ideal reproduction of the autonomised self-movement of those form-determinations, and only as a *result* of this exposition, culminating with the money-form as the thing-like immediate mode of existence of the social character of labour in capitalism, does Marx make clear that at stake here is the form in which ‘individuals produce in society’. But *in the course* of the dialectical unfolding of the commodity, its producer (and hence her consciousness) is virtually absent. The consequence of this is that when Marx does eventually address the consciousness of the commodity producer as the immediate object of his exposition in section 4, the transition might appear as an abrupt (if not extrinsic) leap. However, my claim is that it immanently follows from the determinations discovered in section 3.<sup>53</sup>

Now, regardless of Marx’s ‘extreme’ presentational strategy of obliteration of all reference to human subjectivity in the first three sections of Chapter 1, the very ‘inner life’ of the subject matter precludes an earlier introduction of a fuller discussion of the form-determinations of the consciousness of the commodity producer as immediate object of exposition.<sup>54</sup> In effect, insofar as the commodity *really is* the form taken by the general social relation in capitalist society, its content in the general social character of labour could hardly be posited until presenting its ‘roundabout’ manifestation through the expression of value in section 3, that is, in indissoluble unity with its necessary reified mode of social mediation. Seen from a different angle, when Marx’s exposition eventually addresses (commodity-producing) labour as such in section 2, it is quite simply impossible to immanently discover the unity of the general social

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51 Marx 1993, p. 83.

52 Iñigo Carrera 2013, p. 68.

53 It is interesting that in the appendix to the first edition of *Capital* Marx introduced the discussion of commodity fetishism as the fourth peculiarity of the equivalent form (Marx 1976b, p. 59). The point about the place of commodity fetishism in the appendix to the first edition has also been noted in passing by Chris Arthur (Arthur 2004).

54 This is valid, of course, if one wants firmly and strictly to remain true to the ideal reproduction of the object. However, the dialectical researcher could decide, for didactic and pedagogic reasons, to introduce remarks which are external to the real movement at stake, but which might help readers who will most likely be used to representational thought but unfamiliar with the form of motion of the dialectical method. In other words, there is a trade-off between rigour and ‘reader friendliness’ in a context where dialectical cognition is not yet the general form of scientific thought.

relation since, precisely by virtue of the private character of productive activity in this society, that general social character of production is not directly manifest as an attribute of labour in action. *A fortiori*, it is not possible at that stage to expound in and of itself the form in which commodity producers carry that social character of their individual productive activity as a form-determination of their consciousness. Although the 'socially necessary' aspect of value-producing labour discovered through *analysis* already makes evident that the product must be useful for an individual other than its producer (it must be a 'social use-value'), this social character is still not posited (and hence fully discovered) as entailing the *general unity* of the process of human metabolism as a whole. True, Marx does discover in section 2 that the existence of the commodity he is analysing presupposes a *generalised* social division of labour (yet the latter is not the 'consequence of propensity to truck, barter and exchange', as Adam Smith argued in Chapter 2 of *The Wealth of Nations*). However, this analytical discovery is reached by *representational* means when facing the concrete character of labour;<sup>55</sup> more concretely, by the external observation that

the totality of heterogeneous use-values or physical commodities reflects a totality of similarly heterogeneous forms of useful labour, which differ in order; genus, species and variety: in short, a social division of labour.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, Marx simply points to the seemingly unconnected collection of different concrete labours which comprise social production. In turn, the specificity of the contemporary form of social mediation of the division of labour is discovered by an equally extrinsic comparison of commodity-producing society with pre-capitalist forms of social life, showing that the division of labour is 'common' to both and hence a generic determination that does not explain the historicity of value-production. At most, then, the initial analytical encounter with 'labour', resulting from the search for the substance of value, could present the determination of consciousness as the human form of organising the one-sidedly individual character of productive activity. This would then reveal that, in the organisation of her privately undertaken process of production, the consciousness and will of the commodity producer is not directly subordinated to any other consciousness and will that could tell her how to allocate her labour-power in a determinate concrete form. In other words, the productive consciousness of the commodity producer would be grasped as being in full control over the *individual* character of labour. However, nothing could

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55 Iñigo Carrera 2007, p. 229.

56 Marx 1976c, p. 132.

be said at that stage of the presentation about the way in which that productive consciousness mediates the organisation of the insertion of that singular productive action into the system of the social division of labour, i.e. about the social character of individual labour.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, an exposition that rigorously sticks to the ideal reproduction of the object can address the form-determinations of the consciousness of the commodity producer only after facing the unity of the general social relation. The latter can be firstly discovered only as 'spoken in the language of commodities' (i.e. through the expression of the value-content in the form of exchange-value) and not directly as a personal determination of the human individual. However, once that point in the dialectical exposition of the commodity has been reached (now *known*, in its money-form, as the immediate carrier of the unity of the general social relation of production), its own immanent development demands that the presentation veers toward the explicit scrutiny of the consciousness of the producer as its immediate subject matter.

Now, in this passage, the exposition will inevitably have to retrace some of its steps and reconsider 'commodity-producing labour'. However, in this new take on its determinations, labour can be immediately grasped in the unity of its individual and general social character *and* 'spoken in the language of human beings', that is, as their *conscious* socially-determined individual life activity. It is this reconsideration of labour as human action which, as anticipated above, allows the exposition to throw new light on the *content* of the value-form. For, as we have seen, the latter is thus revealed not simply as the thing-like representation of the social character of privately undertaken labour. Additionally, it can now be recognised as a form of objectivity which is unconsciously projected by human consciousness itself when regulating such a privately-performed productive action.

*The private producer's brain reflects this twofold social character of his labour only in the forms which appear in practical intercourse, in the*

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57 An earlier introduction of the subjectivity of the commodity producer along the lines suggested above can be found in Iñigo Carrera's alternative exposition of the commodity. See Iñigo Carrera 2007, pp. 33–4. The advantage of this presentational strategy is that it allows a smoother transition between the form of value and commodity fetishism, since by the beginning of section 4 consciousness is already there confronting its own social determinations in the autonomous shapes of the commodity and money-forms. The downside is that it 'spoils' the strategy of making the presentation reflect more starkly the objective automatism of the organisation of the process of social metabolism through the commodity-form.

*exchange of products.* Hence the socially useful character of his private labour is reflected in the form that the product of labour has to be useful to others, and the social character of the equality of the various kinds of labour is reflected in the form of the common character, as values, possessed by these materially different things, the products of labour.<sup>58</sup>

This determination of the objectivity of value as an alienated external form posited by the productive consciousness of the private individual is explicitly and unequivocally presented by Marx in a passage from the first edition of *Capital*.

So just *what* a value is does not stand written on its forehead. In order to relate their products to one another as commodities, men are compelled to equate their various labours to abstract human labour. They do not know it, but they *do* it, by reducing the material thing to the abstraction, *value*. This is a primordial and hence unconsciously instinctive operation of their brain, which necessarily grows out of the particular manner of their material production and the relationships into which this production sets them.<sup>59</sup>

In a nutshell, value becomes known as the mode of existence of the alienated consciousness of the private producer, a 'socially valid', therefore objective, form of thought.<sup>60</sup>

Note, however, that from the point of view of the formal structure of presentation, this reconsideration of the content of value, even if necessary, entails an instance of diversion from the synthetic progress of dialectical development. It is the 'analytic detour' in Marx's presentation to which I referred above, and that takes the reader from value/money back to privately-organised social labour (now explicitly posited as mediated by consciousness). Once this analytic deepening of the content of value is exhausted, the dialectical presentation must obviously resume the synthetic movement of reproduction from the prior point at which the analysis culminated, namely, the discovery of value as the alienated form in which the consciousness of the private producer organises her individual participation in the process of social metabolism in its unity.

58 Marx 1976c, p. 166; emphasis added.

59 Marx 1976b, p. 36.

60 Marx 1976c, p. 169. On the connection between commodity-form and consciousness, see the detailed discussion in Fitzsimons 2012. Reichelt 2007 also provides insightful reflections on value objectivity as 'unconsciously posited by an act of consciousness'.

But this obviously implies an unavoidable element of repetition of the passage over the synthetic sequence from ‘private labour’ to ‘value’. It is precisely those passages from Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism which could lead to the (misguided) reading that the essential content of the section revolves around the explanation of why private labour must take the value-form of its product.<sup>61</sup> In order to clarify this point, let us return to the more detailed reconstruction of Marx’s systematic argument in the fourth section of Chapter 1.

### The Determinations of the Alienated Form Taken by the Productive Consciousness of the Private Individual

My methodologically-minded reading of the section on commodity fetishism has so far reached the point at which Marx’s exposition analytically discovers the alienated consciousness of the (private) producer behind the commodity-form of the product of labour. The limits of this analytic discovery of the alienated consciousness for the further progress of the dialectical investigation are formally analogous to those experienced by the search for the content of the exchangeability of the commodity in sections 1 and 2 of Chapter 1 of *Capital*. As a reflection of the general role of the phase of analysis in the dialectical method discussed in the previous section, it can only account for the ‘what’ of the phenomenon under scrutiny, but is incapable of offering an explanation

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61 An emblematic *locus classicus* of this misreading can be found in the influential work of Rubin, for whom the account of commodity fetishism constitutes the ‘propaedeutic’ to, and basis of, the determinations of the value-form (Rubin 1972, pp. 6, 61). In effect, Rubin considers that section 3 of the first chapter contains a *purely formal* development that simply illustrates the different forms of exchange-value as modes of expression of value, and further submits that ‘Marx does not remain on the explanation of the form of value, and quickly passes to its various modifications, to the individual “forms of value”: accidental, expanded, general and monetary’ (Rubin 1972, p. 114). Thus, the precise place where Marx unfolds in great detail the explanation of the reason to be of value is taken by Rubin as containing no more than merely ‘incidental’ brief passages on value as social form (*ibid.*). And where exactly does Rubin find a ‘detailed elaboration’ of the value form? For instance, in a footnote, specifically number 34 in the Penguin edition of *Capital* (Marx 1976c, p. 169). Now, by definition, a footnote can hardly contain the elaboration of the essential content of a form-determination. Furthermore, in that particular footnote, Marx is unambiguously commenting on the ideological and apologetic character of the science of political economy (for falling prey to the fetish-like character of the commodity), and is not, by any stretch of the imagination, ‘elaborating in greater detail’ on the determinations of the value-form.



of its determinate 'why'. Specifically, the analysis of the commodity-form from the perspective of the human being as the material subject of social labour can shed light on what the fetish-like character of the product is: the inverted representation of the social determinations of individual labour in the form of value. But this leaves the question as to why the consciousness of the human being must experience her own immanent determinations in such an alienated form. As follows from Marx's materialist standpoint, this fetishised form of consciousness can have no other basis than the historical form taken by social being in capitalism, that is, the 'specific social character of the labour which produces' commodities, namely, private labour: 'Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other'.<sup>62</sup>

The explanation of the necessity of the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer must therefore lie in the ideal reproduction of the form in which the social character of private labour asserts itself through the exchange of commodities. Having reached that point, Marx's exposition thus resumes, in the rest of the sixth paragraph of section 4, the synthetic unfolding of the movement of the unity of the general social relation mediated by the commodity-form. However, unlike the earlier account in section 3 on the 'value-form, or exchange-value', the dialectical development can now explicitly posit the indirect form in which social labour attains unity from the perspective of the conscious practical activity of private individuals.

The sum total of the labour of these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. In other words, the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.<sup>63</sup>

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62 Marx 1976c, p. 165.

63 Marx 1976c, pp. 165–6.

Marx's presentation thus finally unfolds the necessity of the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer. As a private and independent human being, the producer is incapable of recognising that her productive action possesses social determinations that transcend the immediacy of its singularity. Consequently, when organising the expenditure of the labour-power that she embodies, the consciousness of the human individual must project or transpose – hence confront – those individually-borne social powers as external to her individuality and existing as the objective attribute of the product, which allows it to enter the exchange-relation and manifest indirectly the human subject's immanent determination as an individual organ of social labour: the form of exchangeability or the value-form. In sum, the latter is the fetishised form in which the consciousness of the private producer resolves the organisation of her participation in the general process of social metabolism.

With this Marx expounds the determination of consciousness with regards to its most general form in capitalism. From this simplest determination of the consciousness of the commodity producer, he then proceeds to unfold its more concrete form of realisation in its generic condition as the human form of organising transformative action upon nature. In the first place, through the productive action that it privately regulates in the direct process of production. Thus, the producer not only faces her own social powers as external to her subjectivity and as carried by the product of her labour in the process of exchange through which social labour attains unity. As exchange extends its role in social reproduction, the plenitude of which is reached in capitalist society where it becomes the general social relation, this inverted consciousness starts to regulate the direct production-process itself. Under those circumstances, already at that moment must the commodity producer put her consciousness at the service of social powers which she sees as alien to her subjectivity, that is, as belonging to the commodity.<sup>64</sup> When resolving the concrete form in which she will privately expend the aliquot part of the total labour-power of society that she embodies, the social character of her labour already appears to the consciousness of the producer as an attribute of the product in a twofold sense.<sup>65</sup> Firstly, she must produce a use-value which must satisfy the needs of other individuals with whom she does not have any immediate or direct social nexus. Secondly, that socially useful character of the product must be formally mediated by its determination as the bearer of the property to be transformed into any other use-value, that is, the attribute of general exchangeability or the value-form. Thus, at the very moment in which she actually exerts her productive

64 Iñigo Carrera 2007, pp. 58–9.

65 Marx 1976c, p. 166.

subjectivity in the direct process of production, and in order to organise her affirmation as an individual organ of the social division of labour, the private individual must produce not only socially useful things, but also exchangeable products; she must posit value. In brief, the private individual must already alienate her productive consciousness in the commodity when acting in the immediate production process.<sup>66</sup>

At this juncture, after having uncovered value as the reified mode of existence of the determinations of consciousness, Marx hastens to clarify that this by no means implies that the human individual is actually aware of this fact. Thus, he argues, it is not the case that commodity producers consciously recognise the determination of their private labours as individual fragments of human social labour and thereby exchange their products as equivalent materialisations of abstract labour, i.e. give them the form of value. It is the other way around. They *unconsciously* give the products of labour the form of value and, through this reified social mediation, they equalise behind their own backs their private labours as individual organs of the total labour of society on the basis of their material identity as pure expenditures of human labour-power.<sup>67</sup> The constitution of the social objectivity of the value-form, whilst being the spontaneous product of their own brain (hence of their consciousness), appears to the commodity producers as a *fait accompli* springing by nature from the materiality of the product of labour. In sum, the consciousness of the commodity producer, in its most general and simple form, is not only an inverted consciousness, but also an apparent one. As the bearer of that form of consciousness, the human individual is unable to recognise the necessity – i.e. the determinations – of her conscious action beyond the appearance of being an abstractly independent action. As the necessary 'spontaneous and natural' form in which the producer privately organises the insertion of her practical action into the social metabolic process as a whole, this immediate practical

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66 In this sense, value-positing is for Marx an immanent result of the direct production process and not, as Rubin and contemporary 'circulationist' value-form theorists argue, a determination of the sphere of circulation which 'leaves its imprint' on a labour process that posits value only 'mentally' or 'latently' (Rubin 1972; Reuten and Williams 1989; Heinrich 2011 and 2012). For a more detailed critique of Rubin's circulationist value-form theory and its political implications, see Kicillof and Starosta 2007a. Bonefeld 2010, drawing on Bellofiore 2009 and Arthur 2001, attempts to avoid the pitfalls of Rubin's circulationist views by giving an objective character (as opposed to merely mental or ideal) to the projection of the ghost-like objectivity of value back into production from its original constitution in exchange. For a critique of Bonefeld's position, see Kicillof and Starosta 2011.

67 Marx 1976c, pp. 166–7.

consciousness persists even after political economy scientifically discovers the labour content of the value-form.<sup>68</sup>

In this sense, the corollary of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism is that consciousness is actually torn asunder when social being takes the form of private labour. It simultaneously exists both as a form of the subject of social labour and as an objective form of its product.<sup>69</sup> Before continuing with the textual commentary on commodity fetishism, let us probe deeper into this fundamental point.

In its generic condition as the specifically human capacity to organise the life-process, consciousness always entails a twofold determination as much as the labouring activity that it regulates.<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, it is the form in which the human being rules the immediacy of the individual productive expenditure of her corporeal powers in order to appropriate and transform external nature into a means for human life. In this determination, consciousness is the human capacity to organise the unfolding of the individual character of labour. On the other hand, those individually-borne productive powers can only be constituted socially, that is, they can only develop as a result of the productive action of other individuals (who, for instance, have participated in the production of the use-values whose consumption resulted in the productive attributes borne by the former individual's labour-power). Moreover, the individual labourer produces use-values not solely for her own consumption, but for others, that is, *social* use-values. Although an individual human action, labour therefore always has an intrinsically social character as well. This twofold character is borne by consciousness as its necessary form of organisation. Consciousness thereby does not simply undertake the regulation of the individual appropriation of the potentialities of external nature in order to transform it, but must also mediate the establishment of individual labour's immanent unity with the socially-general metabolic process of which it is an organic part. As an attribute borne by the individuality of each human being, consciousness is thus the capacity to establish the unity of social labour through the individual productive action of each of its subjects, i.e. to regulate the social character of individual labour.

It is this twofold immanent potentiality of consciousness which is torn apart in commodity-producing society. Insofar as the private form of labour negates the capacity of human subjectivity to recognise and control the social character of its activity, that material potentiality of consciousness becomes

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68 Marx 1976c, p. 167.

69 Fitzsimons 2012, p. 37.

70 Fitzsimons 2012, pp. 44–6, Iñigo Carrera 2007, pp. 43–9.

formally alienated in the commodity. In this social determination, consciousness thereby exists in the mode of the objectivity of value. But the other side of this inversion is that, as subjective capacity, the consciousness of the commodity producer becomes determined as an abstractly-individual human attribute. Only in this one-sided form does consciousness immediately exist *as consciousness*.<sup>71</sup>

Based on these premises, let us now return to Marx's argument in the section on commodity fetishism. After having established the *genesis* or *social constitution* of the doubling of the consciousness of the commodity producer, Marx systematically proceeds to unfold the concrete form in which this abstractly-individual practical subjectivity apprehends the alienated mode of existence of its social determinations as an *already-constituted objective form*. More specifically, the immediate practical consciousness of the commodity producer ideally represents the movement of her alienated social being in the form of an estimate of the proportions in which her commodities will exchange for the other commodities she needs. Thus, Marx comments:

What initially concerns producers in practice when they make an exchange is how much of some other product they get for their own; in what proportions can the products be exchanged?<sup>72</sup>

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71 Now, lest my argument be misread as 'idealist', it goes without saying that I am not referring to an abstractly autonomous consciousness floating in mid-air but to the conscious social being of the human individual as a productive subject, i.e. to its determination as an organ of the materiality of the social metabolic process of humanity. More specifically, I am referring to the way in which the private form taken by the organisation of social labour is necessarily mediated by – or exists in and through – the conscious productive practice of human beings. In other words, there are no social relations of production or social practice whose inner determinations could exist abstractly separated from (i.e. not *immanently* mediated by) consciousness. Social practice is always *conscious* practical activity. The point of Marx's 'materialism' is not to conceive of social being as a self-subsistent existence that externally 'causes' or 'conditions' from such exteriority an equally self-subsistent consciousness. Such severance and consequent external relation of social being and consciousness would certainly be idealist. As follows from Marx's materialist dialectical method, social relations of production are the immanent material *content* which is necessarily realised in the *form* of the determinations of the consciousness of the human individual. As Marx eloquently puts it in the *1861–63 Manuscripts*, 'social relations only exist between human beings to the extent that they think' (Marx 1988, p. 232).

72 Marx 1976c, p. 167.

Now, insofar as consciousness is but the organisation of human action, the next systematic step after presenting the *form* in which the private producer represents ‘in her head’ the value-determinations in a constituted form, must consist in expounding the way in which this practical subjectivity productively *acts* on this basis in order to take part in the system of all-round material interdependence characterising generalised commodity production. When faced with the movement of the unity of their social life-process in a form that escapes their own individual potentialities, human beings are condemned to act, in Reichelt’s eloquent formulation, as

executors of constraints generated and reproduced by themselves, which are implemented in and through their conscious actions without, however, being consciously accessible to them.<sup>73</sup>

At stake here, then, is the *autonomisation* of the general social relation from the conscious control of individuals and the consequent all-too-real appearance or ‘objective illusion’ of *automatism* characterising capitalistic production.

As Marx argues, this determination of the practical action of private individuals becomes firmly established only when the movement of the quantitative articulation of the social division of labour becomes regulated by the magnitude of value.<sup>74</sup> This is because the degree in which the products of labour are exchangeable starts to vary independently of the producer’s individual consciousness and will. Hence, in order to satisfy her qualitatively and quantitatively determined needs – thereby reproducing her natural life – the producer cannot but determine her consciousness and will as the servants of the capricious changes of the magnitude of value of the commodity she produces, which varies ‘continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers.’<sup>75</sup> In other words, she not only faces her own social determinations as alien powers borne by the product of labour, but the latter comes to control the producer herself. As Iñigo Carrera succinctly puts it,<sup>76</sup> the commodity producer can reproduce herself as a *person* only by acting as the most abject *personification* of the commodity.<sup>77</sup>

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73 Reichelt 2007, p. 5.

74 Marx 1976c, p. 167.

75 Ibid.

76 Iñigo Carrera 2008, pp. 11–12.

77 The rest of the section in Chapter 1 of *Capital* deals with the *ideological* scientific form of the alienated consciousness of the modern individual (political economy) and with general comments on other social forms and their respective forms of social consciousness.

With this characterisation of the practical subjectivity of human beings as personifications of the movement of the value-form, Marx's exposition completes the ideal reproduction of the simplest social determinations of the alienated consciousness of the private individual and its concrete forms in the sphere of production. From the point of view of the formal structure of the dialectical presentation, the important point to bring out is the precise sequence of form-determinations that guides the flow of Marx's argument, which I will now formally sketch out.

As I have shown in the previous section, Marx's exposition firstly moves analytically in order to discover the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer behind the value-form and private labour as the foundation of the former. From that point onwards, he undertakes again the synthetic return journey from private labour to value, albeit now as mediated by consciousness, thereby accounting for the 'why' of the latter's alienated mode of existence in the commodity. In this phase of his argument, the unfolding of novel form-determinations concerning the inner connection between consciousness and value inevitably overlaps with repetitions of points made earlier about the inner connection between private labour and value. After moving from human subjectivity to its transposed form of existence in the objectivity of value, Marx turns his attention back to the material subject of social labour in order to uncover the form of this consciousness which, in its immediacy, appears as abstracted from its social determinations. It is here that, strictly speaking, the presentation of entirely new content actually starts to unfold. The exposition thus reveals the sundering of the immanent twofold determination of human productive consciousness (individual and social) into an abstractly individual attribute of the material subject of social labour and the objectified mode of existence of its social determinations in the commodity, the latter being posited by the spontaneous or unconscious act of consciousness itself. What follows is the development of the concrete form in which the private producers ideally reflect on those social determinations, grasping them in their immediacy as already-existing forms of human life. On the basis of these immediate appearances, they organise their alienated practical action in order to reproduce the materiality of their lives, thereby becoming determined as personifications of the autonomised self-movement of those objectified forms of social mediation. Note in this regard that this means that the relation between consciousness and value suffers, as it were, a reversal. If at the beginning value

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The latter are external observations in the dialectical presentation which evidently play a didactic or pedagogical role by helping to emphasise the specificity of capitalist social forms.

appeared as the self-negating mode of existence of consciousness, the exposition later reveals that human subjectivity and its conscious practical action actually develop into a concrete form of the self-movement of the value-form. One could argue that in this way Marx eventually justifies his presentational strategy of total obliteration of subjectivity when structuring the argument in the first three sections of Chapter 1 in apparently 'objectivistic' terms around the explanation of the exchangeability of the commodity as such: the establishment of the unity of capitalist social production proves to be predicated on a real automatism and not on the conscious knowing and willing of the material subject of social labour.

With all this in mind, we can now take stock of the precise systematic place and significance of the section on commodity fetishism in Marx's order of presentation. Inasmuch as it has the consciousness of the commodity producer as its immediate object of exposition, it can only appear *after* the analytic and synthetic development of the determinations of the value-form. The reason for this is that the determinations unfolded in the former are nothing more than the forms in which the latter concretely develop. To put it plainly, *the individual consciousness of the commodity producer is a concrete form in which the commodity, as the formal subject of the process of human metabolism, realises its own determinations.*

The full significance of this order of determination can be better appreciated in Chapter 2, in which, as anticipated above, Marx presents that alienated consciousness in motion, effectively acting as personification of her commodity in the sphere of exchange, that is, in the phase of the social reproduction process in which the unity of the social character of labour becomes manifest through a direct relation between human beings (i.e. the voluntary contract). In other words, when he presents the process of exchange as the concrete realisation of the social relation materialised in the commodity. After analytically penetrating the immediate appearance that it is the human individual who consciously and voluntarily controls the product of labour, Marx sets out to unfold the realisation of the essential determination with which the previous section finished, namely: in capitalist society,

the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations: it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other.<sup>78</sup>

What follows, then, is the alienated action of individuals determined as personifications who, through their unconsciously-organised social action, cannot

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<sup>78</sup> Marx 1976c, p. 179.



help manifesting by way of their 'natural instinct' the 'natural laws of the commodity' discovered in Chapter 1.<sup>79</sup> In effect, out of the development of the exchange-process necessarily crystallises the money-form of the commodity. The value-form of the product of labour affirms itself as an abstract form through its self-negation, that is, by realising its own necessity in the form of the atomistic action of commodity owners, which act as vehicles for the realisation of the 'will' of their commodities.<sup>80</sup> Hence the importance of grasping not only the unity between the section on commodity fetishism and the rest of Chapter 1, but also of accounting for the crucial presentational unity between the latter as a whole and Chapter 2.

As the ideal reproduction of these real relations among forms of different levels of abstraction, the dialectical presentation cannot posit the fetishism of commodities – i.e. the inverted self-consciousness of the commodity producer and its determination as personification of the value-form – prior to the unfolding of the social relations whose unity is ideally mediated in that historical form of consciousness. If it did so, it would, like it or not, fall prey to the idealist inversion of positing consciousness as taking concrete form in social being. And, since the times of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had made it clear that such a way of conceiving the relation between social being and forms of consciousness entailed turning the real relations upside down. Maybe aware of the risk that his own exposition might be read in that inverted fashion, Marx in the first edition of *Capital* explicitly stated the order of the relation.

First their relationship exists in a practical mode. Second, however, their relationship exists as relationship for them. The way in which it exists for them or is reflected in their brain arises from the very nature of the relationship.<sup>81</sup>

### Conclusion

By way of brief concluding remarks, let us point to some implications of overlooking the precise systematic meaning and place of commodity fetishism in Marx's dialectical exposition in *Capital* as reconstructed above. In a nutshell,

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79 Marx 1976c, p. 180.

80 Arthur 2004, pp. 37–8, correctly points this out. Heinrich also brings out this issue in distinguishing between Marx's exposition of the 'economic determinate form' and the 'activity of commodity owners'. See Heinrich 2012, pp. 72–9.

81 Marx 1976b, p. 36.

I think that it leads to a conception of Marx's critique of political economy, and in particular of the section on commodity fetishism, one-sidedly determined as an exposition of the social constitution of the forms of objectivity of capitalist society. The transposed relation between human practical activity and its objectified forms of social mediation becomes thus exhausted in the constitution of those forms of objectivity as a hostile alienated social power standing above and constraining the affirmation of an abstractly-free human individuality. But this inversion is not followed through to its necessary unfolding in the determination of the latter as the pure personification of the value-form. This has the consequence of rendering the most general determination of human individuality in capitalism undertheorised, thus opening up the possibility of postulating an instance of exteriority between human consciousness and will (i.e. subjectivity) and the value-form; the former is thereby seen as not fully determined as a mode of existence of the latter. As I have argued at great length elsewhere,<sup>82</sup> this exteriority eventually hinders the full comprehension of what a consequent dialectical development of these abstract determinations necessarily leads to, namely: the discovery of the determination of (social) capital as the concrete alienated subject of the historical movement of present-day society. To put it differently, this reading fails to follow the transition from the fetishism of commodities to the fetishism of capital, that is, from its abstract determination as a formal inversion between subject and product of social labour up to its full transformation into a complete real inversion, i.e. to the constitution of the total social capital as the alienated subject of the movement of modern society, with social classes as its antagonistic collective personifications. It goes without saying that this does not entail an abstractly theoretical interest. Quite to the contrary, it can be shown that it is a necessary step to discovering the determinations of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class as *immanent* in the very unfolding of the reified forms of social mediation of capitalist society. In other words, a proper grasp of the systematic content and significance of commodity fetishism is a condition for the development of dialectical science into the conscious practical critique of the capital-form.

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82 Starosta 2016. See, in particular, Chapters 6 and 9.

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