

Althusserianism and Value-form Theory: Rancière, Althusser and the Question of Fetishism Panagiotis Sotiris

Abstract:

Louis Althusser's writings in the 1970s are very critical of certain aspects of Karl Marx's theory of the value form and in particular the notion of fetishism. However, at the moment of High Althusserianism, in the 1965 collective volume *Reading Capital*, we find a text by Jacques Rancière that is an important contribution to value-form theory and offers a novel approach to the notion of fetishism, treating it as a highly original theory of the emergence of ideological miscognition rather than an idealist anthropological critique of alienation. However, Rancière later renounced his 1965 reading at the same period that Althusser rejected the notion of fetishism. In this text I attempt to re-read Rancière's interventions and Althusser's writings on the notion of fetishism. I also attempt to show that Rancière's 1965 intervention opens up the way for a new reading of the fetishism of value and of the relation between the emergence of ideological representations and their reproduction.

Keywords:

Marx, Althusser, Rancière, ideology, fetishism, Marxism, Value-Form.

Introduction

One of the most interesting aspects of *Reading Capital* is the very fact that it is also a contribution to the value theory debate, a contribution that in a certain sense pre-dates the opening of the debate through texts as Hans-Georg Backhaus 'Dialectic of the Value Form'¹ or Roman Rosdolsky's *The Making of Marx's Capital*,² or the re-discovery of the work of I.I. Rubin,³ or the later contribution to value theory.⁴ Yet, *Reading Capital* is such an intervention. This is obvious in Althusser's own intervention as a confrontation with the very status of Marx's *Capital* as a theoretical text,⁵ and its textual dynamics. It is also obvious in Rancière text from *Reading Capital*.⁶

1 Backhaus 1980.

2 Rosdolsky 1977.

3 Rubin 1973.

4 See for example Elson (ed.) 1979; Williams (ed.) 1988; Arthur 2004.

5 In Althusser and Balibar 1970.

6 Waiting for the new full English edition of *Reading Capital* that has been announced by

1. Rancière's theory of the value-form

Rancière's text begins with a reading of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, which for him represent the 'the most systematic form of the anthropological critique carried out by Marx'.⁷ This critique takes the form of an opposition between critical discourse and speculative discourse regarding abstraction. Abstraction is viewed in this anthropological critique as both a logical and a real process. The real process refers, in line with Feuerbach's archetypical anthropological critique, to the process through which the essence of real objects is posited outside of them. The crucial theoretical step made by young Marx was to transfer the Feuerbachian notion of the objectification of the essence to the terrain of work and production: 'Thus the object produced by the worker, appears as a Feuerbachian object, as the objectification of man's own essence'.⁸ This opens up the way for a theorization of capitalist social relations as relations of alienation. This, according to Rancière, is helped by a pre-critical conception of production in general as a relation between man and nature and between man and man, which enables a conception of production as alienation, as an estrangement between man and his essence. However, this is not based upon a conception of social relations of production. Rancière insists that although Marx seems to present a classical Feuerbachian critique of the alienation as a form of objectification of an essence that separates it from its subject, at the same time there is also a Hegelian conception of humanity as the 'real subject of history' that 'makes use of illusory subjective states in order to impose its laws'.⁹ Rancière's conclusion is that inside this problematic it is impossible to pose the question of a scientific theory of the value and the capitalist mode of production: 'we can see how the pair: theory of the abstraction / theory of the subject, prevent the problem being posed of the setting up of the field of political economy as a *field of objectivity*'.¹⁰

Regarding the mature work of Marx, Rancière begins with rejecting

Verso, we use the translation of Rancière's text that appeared in three issues of *Theoretical Practice* and one issue of *Economy of Society*.

7 Rancière 1971a, p. 36.

8 Rancière 1971a, p. 43.

9 Rancière 1971a, p. 50. In this sense Rancière's reading is in sharp contrast to other readings of the 1844 *Manuscripts* that insisting on the element of continuity in Marx's work. See for example Arthur 1986.

10 Rancière 1971a, p. 51.

the solution suggested by the Della Volpe School.¹¹ According to the position suggested by Della Volpe Marx's critique in *Capital* is based on the critical approach that he had already used in the *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*,¹² where Marx had insisted on the centrality critique of the subject - predicate inversion, as an inversion of the actual relations between real objects and theoretical abstractions. In contrast, Rancière insists that the absence of the notion of the subject, or of something that could play the role of the subject in Marx's mature work makes it evident that Marx opts for a different critical approach.

For Rancière the important question that Marx poses is exactly the question of form: Why does value takes this form, why does it take this form in exchange, although it is not constituted as such in exchange? For Rancière to answer this question we need a different form of causality that can refer to social relations of production as an 'absent cause'.¹³ It is exactly this that can explain the complex relation between appearing and concealing that characterizes the capitalist economy in its appearance as mainly an endless series of commodities exchanges. We are no longer dealing with a question of subjectivity or of subjective appropriation (and distortion) of reality.

Thus the formal operations which characterize the space in which economic objects are related together manifest social processes while concealing them. We are no longer dealing with an anthropological causality referred to the act of a subjectivity, but with quite a new causality, borrowing this concept from Jacques-Alain Miller, who formulated it to the exposition he devoted to the critique of Georges Politzer. Here we can state it as follows: what determines the relation between the effects (the relations between the commodities) is the cause (the social relations of production) insofar as it is absent. This absent cause is not labour as a subject, it is the identity of abstract labour and concrete labour inasmuch as this generalization expresses the structure of a certain mode of production, the capitalist mode of production.

In other words, the equation $x \text{ commodities A} = y \text{ commodities B}$ is, as we have seen, an impossible equation. What Marx

11 Della Volpe 1997. On Della Volpe see Fraser 1977.

12 In MECW, Vol. 3.

13 Rancière 1971b, p. 36.

does, and what distinguishes him radically from classical economics. Without this theory, classical economics could not conceive the system in which capitalist production is articulated. By not recognizing this absent cause, it failed to recognize the commodity form as 'the *simplest and most general* form' of a determinate mode of production: the capitalist mode of production. Even if it did recognize the substance labour in the analysis of the commodity, it condemned itself to incomprehension of the more developed forms of the capitalist production process.¹⁴

It is obvious that we are dealing here with a very important contribution to the debate on the value-form. The value-form is indeed the manifestation of a mode of production, and not simply of a social or subjective calculus that abstracts from real objects. Instead, social relations of production in their complex articulation with the level of exchange determine this form or appearance of an equation between the products of different private labours and the emergence of the value-form as exactly this appearance and contradiction at the same time. Moreover, it is here that indeed we can find a 'dialectic' between the visible and the invisible - a topic that also runs through Althusser's own contribution to *Reading Capital*.¹⁵ The very form of appearing is at the same time a form of concealing not in the sense of a alienated subjectivity that loses sight of the fact that wealth in the form of commodities is the product of its own exploited labour, but in the sense of an objective process where the very result of the causal mechanisms is at the same time the condition of their invisibility. It is a social structure and no longer some distorted and alienated form of subjectivity.

We can no longer have a subject-object couple like that of the *Manuscripts*. In the *Manuscripts* the term *Gegenstand* was given a sensualist meaning, whereas here it is no more than a phantom, the manifestation of then structure. What takes the form

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14 Rancière 1971b, p. 36.

15 'Even if Smith and Ricardo did 'produce', in the 'fact' of rent and profit, the 'fact' of surplus-value, they remained in the dark, not realizing what they had 'produced', since they could not think it in its concept, nor draw from it its theoretical consequences. They were a hundred miles away from being able to *think* it, since neither they nor the culture of their time had ever imagined that a 'fact' might be the existence of a *relation* of 'combination', a relation of complexity, consubstantial with the entire mode of production, dominating its present, its crisis, its future, determining as the law of its structure the entire economic reality, down to the visible detail of the empirical phenomena -- while remaining *invisible* even in their blinding obviousness.' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 181).

of a thing is not labour as the activity of a subject, but the *social character of labour*. And the *human labour* in question here is not the labour of any constitutive subjectivity. It bears the mark of a determinate social structure.¹⁶

Consequently, what is needed is a more complex approach than the simple opposition between philosophical speculation and actual reality that characterized Althusser's earlier anthropological critique, an approach that will attempt to critically deconstruct the real relations that have as a result the obfuscation of social reality. And this goes beyond searching for an underlying reality, a deeper 'truer' reality under the text. What is crucial is the very fact that social reality is like a hieroglyph, at the same time suggesting and concealing real relations.

We are no longer concerned with a *text* calling for a reading which will give us its underlying meaning, but with a *hieroglyph* which has to be deciphered. This deciphering is the work of science. The structure which excludes the possibility of a critical reading is the structure which opens the dimension of science. This science, unlike Ricardo, will not be content to pose labour as the substance of labour while deriding the commodity fetishism of the Mercantilists who conceived value to be attached to the body of a particular commodity. It will explain fetishism by theorizing the structure which founds the thing-form adopted by the social characteristics of labour.¹⁷

Moreover, Rancière insists that Marx's scientific approach is in sharp contrast to the traditional philosophical conception of the object as appearance and as the result of a subjective process. Appearance is a result of objective processes.

[T]he constitution of objects does not appertain to a subjectivity. What does appertain to a subjectivity is perception. Appearance (*Schein*) is determined by the gap between the conditions of the constitution of the objects and the conditions of their

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16 Rancière 1971b, p. 37.

17 Rancière 1971b, p. 39.

perception.¹⁸

The same reference to the absent social relations of production also is necessary if we want to explain the contradictions traversing the very conception of selling labour power as a commodity. The simple substitution of labour (which is creator of value) with labour power (whose reproduction can have a value) cannot explain the wage relation, without reference to capitalist relations of production.

We are confronted with the following contradiction: labour appears as a commodity whereas it cannot ever be a commodity. That is, we are dealing with a structure which is *impossible*. This possibility of impossibility refers us to the absent cause, to the relations of production. The immediate producers, separated from their means of production as a result of Primitive Accumulation, are constrained to sell their labour-power as a commodity. Their labour becomes wage labour and the appearance is produced that what is paid for by the capitalist is their labour itself, and not their labour power.¹⁹

This is the process that leads to the imaginary expression 'value of labour', and it requires a theory of *forms* in order to be explained. Rancière then turns his attention from the notion of *concealment* to the notion of *inversion* between phenomenal form and real process. 'The inversion of the inner structural determinations, which bear witness to the constitutive character of the relations of the production, in their forms of manifestation, thus appears as a fundamental characteristic of the process. It is this law that determines the development of its forms'.²⁰

For Rancière this thematic of the inversion is in fact a theory of the production of subjectivity in the capitalist mode of production, a 'theory of capitalist subjectivity',²¹ a process through which the basic tendencies and dynamics are internalized by the bearers of social relations and practices as motives for action. It is here that Rancière makes a very

18 Rancière 1971b, p. 40.

19 Rancière 1971b, p. 44

20 Rancière 1972, p. 32.

21 Rancière 1972, p. 32.

important choice of theoretical tactics. Instead of going first to Volume One of Marx's *Capital* and the theory of fetishism presented there, he prefers to start by Volume Three and the formation of the average rate of profit and the apparent inversion caused by competition in relation to the real processes and determinations. This has nothing to do with the anthropological relation between essence and phenomena. Instead, the 'conceptual work grasps the articulation of forms insofar as it grasps what determines their articulation, i.e., the social relations, concealed by the a-conceptual connection of the rate of profit'.²² It is here that the notion of the subject as the support (träger) of social relations enters the stage. It is by this mechanism that individual capitalists misperceive profit and cannot perceive the real mechanism by which it is determined. However, this misperception is in fact instrumental for capital accumulation and the reproduction of its conditions. This is determined by the place of the agents of social relations in production.

The place of the agents of production in the process thus determines the necessary representations of their practice as mere expressions of the apparent motion of capital and therefore as totally inverted with respect to its motion.²³

Rancière turns his attention to the relation between value and price of production. He insists that this does not represent an advance in historical stage, but to another level in the process of production, thus opposing Engels' claim in Volume 3 of *Capital* that the law of value was valid for simple commodity production.²⁴

For Rancière it is exactly this theoretical problematization of social forms that is the only way to actually theorize both the structural determinations and the forms of appearance of capitalist social relations and practices.

From here on, it is possible to understand the development of forms of capitalist production. Marx indicates this in a footnote to

22 Rancière 1972, p. 37.

23 Rancière c, p. 41.

24 See Engel's preface to Marx's *Capital*/Volume Three 'This makes clear, of course, why in the beginning of his first book Marx proceeds from the simple production of commodities as the historical premise, ultimately to arrive from this basis to capital' (MECW, Vol. 37, p. 16). For a critique see Heinrich 1996-7.

Chapter One: the value form of the product of labour is the abstract form of the capitalist mode of production. Its analysis enables us to understand the later development of its forms (the money form, the capital form, etc.). On the contrary, if this analysis is lacking, if the critical question of the form is not posed, then the problem of the relation between the essential form and the concrete forms cannot be posed either. One is reduced to *comparison* between the existing categories and the categories which express the inner determination. One is left with a false abstraction which is not developable.²⁵

Consequently, that what is important in Marx's theoretical intervention was exactly the fact that he presented a theoretical system and not just a historicization of the concepts of the classical political economy. In a line similar to Althusser's anti-empiricist and anti-historicist emphasis on the centrality of the *problematic*, Rancière stresses the systematicity of Marx's theoretical approach.

Marx's revolution does not therefore consist of historicizing the categories of political economy. It consists of making a system of them, and we know that a critique is made of a system by its scientific exposition, i.e., that this system reveals a structure which can only be understood in the theory of the development of social formations.²⁶

The last part of Rancière's text turns to the question of fetishism in order to present a reading of the notion of fetishism that distinguishes it from the anthropological reading that can lead up to a variation of an anthropological theory. Instead for Rancière it is important to go back to a theory of social forms in order to explain the fetishistic structure that emerges at the surface of the process of production.

The fetishistic discourse is the elaboration of this connection of concrete forms presented on the surface of the capitalist process and reflected in the consciousness of the agents of production.²⁷

25 Rancière 1972, pp. 46-47.

26 Rancière 1972, p. 48.

27 Rancière 1976, p. 352.

Once again Rancière chooses to begin not with Volume One but with Volume Three of *Capital* in order to study the question of what Marx defines as the externalization [*Verausserlichung*] of capitalist relations, and Marx's references to 'define interest-bearing capital as the most concrete, the most mediated, the most fetishized and the most alienated (*entfremdetste*) form'.²⁸

For Rancière the process that leads to fetishism in Marx begins with the externalization of the relations of capital in the form of interest bearing capital and in particular Marx's reference to it being an a-conceptual [*begrifflose*] form, since it is a form in which 'the form that makes it possible disappears'.²⁹ What seems in itself as an impossible relation (the movement from M to M' in the case of interest bearing capital) 'can only be sustained by what governs the whole circuit: capital as a relation of production, with its complement, wage-labour'.³⁰ In this sense, the circuit of money-capital with its principle of the self-expansion of value that can only be explained by what disappears in the process, namely capitalist social relations, is a condensation of the logic of capitalist social relations.

Thus the circuit of money-capital is the one which best expresses the capitalist process. In fact it is a peculiarity of this process that it has as its principle the self-expansion of value, as the circuit from M to M' clearly expresses. But this determinate form of the process of reproduction of capital, the process of self-expansion of value made possible by the relations of production of capital and wage-labour, tends to disappear in its result.³¹

Consequently, the disappearance of the process in the result is a crucial aspect of the process itself and leads to its misrecognition. This disappearance takes place exactly in interest bearing capital: 'The finance capitalist who advances the sum of money M remains outside the whole process of production and reproduction. All he does is to advance a sum M and withdraw a sum M'. What happens between these two acts

28 Rancière 1976, p. 353.

29 Rancière 1976a, p. 354.

30 Rancière 1976a, p. 356.

31 Ibid.

does not concern him.³² It is exactly this disappearance of the crucial aspect that makes possible capitalist interest, namely capitalist social relations, that sustains both the *Begrifflosigkeit* of interest bearing capital and the process of externalization of the relations of capital.

Thus the whole capitalist process has disappeared in the form M' - M'. The *Begrifflosigkeit* expresses the disappearance of all the intermediary terms whose connection makes the relation of M to M' possible. It thereby expresses the disappearance of what underlies this connection and makes it possible, the capitalist relations of production. This disappearance of the relations of production in the *Begrifflosigkeit* of the form is the basis for the externalization (*Verausserlichung*) of what Marx calls the relations of capital.³³

The result is double motion that includes at the same time the materialization of capitalist social relations and determinations of production and what can be described as a subjectification of the material bases of this process.

We are therefore dealing with a double motion: the materialization of the social determinations of production and the subjectification of its material bases, of the things in which these social determinations are represented and concealed. Marx explains that this double motion was already perceptible in the simplest determination of the capitalist mode of production: the commodity-form of the labour product.³⁴

The question that arises is whether these notions of materialization and subjectification lead us back to an anthropological critique of alienation and of reversal of the subject-predicate relations, as it was the case in the 1844 Manuscripts. According to Rancière in Marx's *Capital* in materialization 'it is not a subject which is separated from itself, whose predicates pass into an alien entity. It is a form which becomes alien to the relation that it supports and, in becoming alien to it, becomes a thing

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32 Rancière 1976a, p. 357.

33 Ibid.

34 Rancière 1976a, p. 360.

and leads to the materialization of the relation.³⁵ Moreover, what 'Marx designates as the subjectification of the thing is the acquisition by the thing of the function of motor of the process'.³⁶ More generally, Rancière stresses the fact that in *Capital* Marx describes how the relation of production 'determines on the one hand a subject function and on the other an object function'.³⁷ It is this process that 'designates the function of the subject as a support for the relation of production'.³⁸ Consequently, we are not dealing with an anthropological critique, but with an attempt towards a scientific theory of social relations and how they induce forms of both objectification and subjectification. The persistence of anthropological references even in Marx's mature work is an evidence of the fact that he never fully thought the difference between the two different problematics, even if, in practice, he affirmed their difference.

In classical political economy what we have is a displacement of the origin of wages, profit and rent, namely 'total social labour time realised in the value whose break-down they represent', a process which goes along with the 'transformation of the social relations of production into things defined by material properties' and is also a disappearance of its limit, the 'total quantity of exploited labour'.³⁹ It is this disappearance of both origin and limit that leads to a fetishistic perception of capital as an endlessly self-expanding form, an *automaton*. In such an approach to fetishism, it ceases to be the result of a deforming speculation, it represents 'the very forms in which the capitalist process exists for the agents of production'.⁴⁰ It becomes a constitutive aspect of the very structure of the capitalist mode of production and a necessary aspect of its reproduction.

Fetishism thus represents not an anthropological process but the specific dislocation according to which the structure of the capitalist mode of production presents itself in the field of *Wirklichkeit*, of *Alltagsleben* (everyday life), and offers itself to the consciousness and action of the agents of production, the supports

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35 Rancière 1976a, p. 361.

36 Rancière 1976a, p. 362.

37 Rancière 1976a, p. 363.

38 Ibid.

39 Rancière 1976a, p. 366.

40 Rancière 1976a, p. 367.

of capitalist relations of production.⁴¹

For Rancière such an approach is very crucial in the sense that it enables us to understand the limits and shortcomings of classical political economy, even though he admits that Marx's own attempt to formulate this had its own limits and historicist overtones (mainly in the sense of a reference to a lack of development of theoretical understanding). At the same time, it makes necessary a new and critical approach to history.

However, it is not the more general relation of Rancière's intervention to the project of 'High Althusserianism' that concerns us here. It is the importance of this text as a contribution to the theory of the value form. Regarding the question of fetishism Rancière makes crucial theoretical choices. The first is that he treats the fetishism of value, the fetishism of self-expanding value as the most crucial aspect and not commodity fetishism. It is interesting to note that this is also relevant to the very evolution of the notion of fetishism. Marx first elaborated the notion of fetishism in the 1861-1863 Manuscript as a fetishism of value and capital and then introduced the notion of commodity fetishism in Volume One. The second is that Rancière incorporates the notion of fetishism to a broader thinking about social forms, presenting in his text a theory of the emergence of the commodity form and the value form as representation - in a complex articulation between materialization and subjectification - of capitalist social relations. This in turn produces a highly original theory of social appearances that moves from the subjective terrain to that of social relations and practices. It is at the level of social structures and in this case of social relations of capitalist exploitation that the condition for the emergence of these forms, as at the same time presence and concealment, emerges. This creates a new relation between the visible and the invisible at the level of social practices and relations. The visibility of social forms is a result of the social relations underlying them, but we are dealing with a different kind of causality, a form of structural causality, or of absent cause, where a structure exists only in its results.

However, if we remain only at this level, we are at the danger of a classical conception of the relation between deeper or latent structures and surface forms, a problematic conception, reminiscent of the classical essence - appearance relation, with which we know that Althusser himself also flirted in *Reading Capital* before abandoning any reference to

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41 Rancière 1976a, p. 368.

the latent structures.⁴² It is here the theory of fetishism enters the stage as a crucial strategic notion. For Rancière, as we have seen, fetishism is not simply a concept that refers to the ability of social reality to obfuscate itself, to conceal its structural determination. Rather, it is a concept that refers to a socially necessary form of miscognition. The very fact that the agents of capitalist social relations do not have an accurate knowledge of the mechanism of value creation and of surplus value as the origin of profit, is indispensable for their fetishistic conception of profit and, consequently for their conception of the average profit as a mechanism for the distribution of capital between sectors and enterprises, for their perception of interest bearing capital and for their perception of the self-expansion of value. All these 'deformed' perceptions of reality are at the same time socially necessary for the expanded reproduction of capitalist social relations. Thus in a certain sense fetishism becomes, by itself, a crucial social relation, a form of socially necessary social representation, bridging the ontological gap between structural determinations and surface appearances avoiding any reproduction of the essence - appearance distinction and any relations between 'depth' and 'surface'. The capitalist mode of production thus becomes the complex and overdetermined articulation between capitalist social relations of exploitation, exemplified in the power relations around the wage relation and inside the workplace, the generalization of the commodity form, and the fetishistic perception of value creation and expansion.

2. Rancière's later rejection of the notion of fetishism

Therefore, it is interesting that Rancière disavowed this text in a text written for the appearance of the final part of his text in *Economy and Society*, considering it part of a collective work with 'reactionary political foundations'.⁴³ Rancière accuses his (and Althusser's) strategy of being unable to take consideration of the conflicting discourses underlying Marx's own texts and in particular of the discourses of the proletariat itself which are echoed in the texts of bourgeois economists, parliamentary enquiries, etc, as echoes of 'voices in the workshop, rumours in the streets, market-places and labour exchanges, to the leading ideas of

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42 On this see Montag 2013.

43 Rancière 1976b, p. 377.

working-class insurrection, by way of the educated forms of working-class literature or the popular forms of street songs'.⁴⁴ Instead for Rancière the Althusserian endeavour is marked by a conception of the relation of discourse to its object that leaves no room for a positive role to what is exterior to the problematic and which always appears 'in the form of a deficiency'.⁴⁵ And he insists that this is particularly true regarding his reading of the notion of fetishism.

Rancière's rejection of his 1965 reading on fetishism is based not only upon his insistence that there are instances when even in Marx's work workers act with greater apprehension of social reality than the theory of ideological illusion suggests. It is also based upon a different reading of the theory of fetishism. It is a rejection of the 'principle which posits that the *constitution of an object and the constitution of its illusion* are one and the same process'.⁴⁶ Moreover, for Rancière there is an evolution in Marx's thinking of the very concept of ideological illusion. In the texts of 1845-47 we can see the contrast between the 'the clarity of the classes directly engaged in struggle on the one hand, with the illusions of the petty-bourgeoisie on the other',⁴⁷ whereas after the defeat of the revolutions of 1848 Marx becomes more interested on the autonomy of science

This political rupture, which ploughed up the space of reality, imposed a different mode of reading the text of bourgeois economic science. In this new reading, the latter is no longer a darkened mirror to be made clear by a critical operation which makes it declare all there is to say, but a rewriting (in the space of a specific rationality) of the fantastic writing of the commodity- whose principle is produced elsewhere. Commodity fetishism does not reproduce man's alienation, nor does it produce its critique: it is the class struggle which separates science and revelation.⁴⁸

Rancière's rejection of the theory of commodity fetishism is not limited to this critique of the epistemological aspects of the Althusserian endeavour. It actually reverses the very notion of fetishism from ideologi-

44 Rancière 1976b, p. 378.

45 Ibid.

46 Rancière 1976b, p. 379.

47 Rancière 1976b, p. 380.

48 Rancière 1976b, p. 381.

cal distortion and concealment to a projection of the proletarian envisioning of emancipation. In the opposition between mystical veil and the clarity of social relations Rancière sees the 'theoretical representative of a leading idea in which are concentrated the dreams of fighting proletarians: the association of free producers'. Consequently, '[f]etishism represents *in theory*, i.e. in terms of the *conditions of understanding* (and of misunderstanding), that other world borne by the proletarian struggle, which makes its object thinkable'.⁴⁹ For Rancière a tension is running through the concept of fetishism in Marx's texts, as a result of what he defines as the double genealogy of fetishism, from both science and proletarian struggles and aspirations.

This was an appeal from the visible of perception to the invisible of science and from that invisible to the representation of *visibility* which its extension gives to it. In this double return is marked the double genealogy of the concept (from the side of bourgeois philosophy and that of the class struggle) in which is reflected also the double political relationship of Marx with the workers in their struggle: impatience at those Parisian workers, self-educated and moralising, infatuated with forming associations, popular banks and co-operative kitchens- and admiration for those same workers, climbing to assault the skies and to seize the state machine.⁵⁰

For Rancière the result of this tension is that the concept of fetishism 'may be twisted either towards the sentimentality of alienation or towards the pedantry of science'.⁵¹ In this sense, Rancière's self-criticism is that he tended to treat the 'spontaneous' ideological representations of an always struggling proletariat as a 'result of machination from outside', namely from capitalist production relations in the ability to self-conceal their class exploitative character, meaning that the 'agents of production are necessarily within the illusion'.⁵² The end of the text links his 1965 reading of fetishism with the position of the French Communist Party against the spontaneous worker's resistance that a great part of the post-

49 Rancière 1976b, p. 382.

50 Rancière 1976b, p. 383

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

May 1968 revolutionary Left referred to:

'Spontaneity does not exist,' proclaims the CGT in a comment on the assassination of Pierre Overney. This is where the discourse of science meets 'proletarian' power and the bosses' militias.⁵³

3. Althusser and Balibar's critique of fetishism

In contrast to Rancière's confrontation with the notion of fetishism, in Althusser we have many instances of a rejection of the very notion of fetishism. In his 'reader's guide' to Volume One of Marx's *Capital* Althusser declares fetishism to be the 'last trace of Hegelian influence' in Marx.⁵⁴ In a note in *Elements of Self-criticism* Althusser insists on the need 'to clear up the problem of the theory which serves as a philosophical *alibi* for all this "reification" literature: the theory of commodity fetishism in Book I, Part I of *Capital*'.⁵⁵

It is in Balibar's extended 1973 'self-criticism' regarding *Reading Capital*, that first appeared in *Theoretical Practice* that we find the first outright rejection of the very notion of fetishism coming from 'Althusserian orthodoxy'. In particular, Balibar makes this self-criticism in relation to his references in *Reading Capital* in which in a line similar to that of Rancière intervention he refers to fetishism as exactly the kind of ideological mystification arising out social practices themselves.

By a double necessity, the capitalist mode of production is both the mode of production in which the economy is most easily recognized as the 'motor' of history, and the mode of production in which the essence of this 'economy' is unrecognized in principle (in what Marx calls 'fetishism'). That is why the first explanations of the problem of the 'determination in the last instance by the economy' that we find in Marx are directly linked to the problem of fetishism. They occur in the texts in *Capital* on the 'fetishism of commodities' (T.I, pp. 88-90; Vol. I, pp. 76-8), on the 'genesis

53 Ibid.

54 Althusser 1971, p. 95.

55 Althusser 1976, p. 118.

of capitalist ground rent' (Vol. III, pp. 763-93) and on the 'trinity formula' (Vol. III, pp. 794-811), where Marx replaces the false conception of this 'economy' as a relation between things by its true definition as a system of social relations. At the same time, he presents the idea that the capitalist mode of production is the only one in which exploitation (the extortion of surplus-value), i.e., the specific form of the social relation that binds classes together in production, is 'mystified', 'fetishized' into the form of a relation between the things themselves. This thesis follows directly from his proof where the *commodity* is concerned: the social relation which constitutes its reality, knowledge of which enables us to assess its fetishism, is precisely the commodity relation as a relation of production, i.e., the commodity relation as generalized by the capitalist mode of production. A social ('human') relation cannot therefore be found behind 'things' in general, but only behind the thing of this capitalist relation.⁵⁶

In 1973 Balibar is ready to reject this position. He insists that the theory of fetishism in Marx is 'totally *idealist*', since on this 'particular but decisive point the *rupture* with idealism *has not taken place*'.⁵⁷ This criticism of the very notion of fetishism as an idealist theoretical conception is based a very specific conception of ideology that echoes aspects of Althusser's theory of ideology in his text on 'Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses of the State'.⁵⁸ In such a conception, ideological social relations, are 'specific social relations really distinct from the relations of production although they are determined by the latter "in the last instance" [...] materialized in specific practices, depending on specific ideological apparatuses'.⁵⁹ It is obvious here that the main point made by Balibar is that a theory of ideology cannot be a theory of ideological representations arising in a spontaneous way in social relations themselves, but mainly a theory of ideological practices materialized in and reproduced by Ideological Apparatuses of the State. It is interesting that Balibar maintained this distinction between a theory of ideology and a theory of fetishism in

56 Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 216-7.

57 Balibar 1973, p. 57.

58 In Althusser 2014.

59 Balibar 1973, p. 57.

later texts such as *The Philosophy of Marx*⁶⁰. In that text, Marx's theory of fetishism is presented as an attempt to theorize the emergence of ideal-ity, the idealization and mystification of capitalist social relations and the emergence of subjectivity, a theory of *subjection*, as opposed to the theory of ideology as a theory of power relations, leading to two different lines in subsequent Marxist research, one oriented towards the state and power relations, the other towards processes of reification. Thus Balibar's conclusion in the 1990s is not a rejection of the problematic of fetishism but rather an insistence on a certain incompatibility between the two approaches:

The theory of ideology is fundamentally a *theory of the State* (by which we mean the theory of domination inherent in the State), whereas that of fetishism is fundamentally a *theory of the market* (the mode of subjection or constitution of the 'world' of subjects and objects inherent in the organization of society as a market and its domination by market forces).⁶¹

Returning now to the Balibar's 1973 self-criticism, there the rejection of the theory of fetishism is based upon two premises. The first has to do with the very notion of ideological mystification as "'structural effect'" (or "formal effect") of the circulation of commodities'.⁶² The second has to do with the fact that the commodity is presented as the '*source or subject of its own misrecognition*'.⁶³ To this, Balibar also adds a political dimension (in a certain analogy but not similarity with the position of Rancière): the theory of fetishism leaves no space to revolutionary political practice as a means to transform ideological relations, leading instead to self-enlightenment as the only option.

For what then remains unintelligible (and fundamentally useless) is a *social practice* of the material transformation of ideological relations (as a specific revolutionary practice), and hence the distinct reality of these relations. If the effect of illusion is *the effect for the individual of the place* in the 'whole' that constitutes

60 Balibar 1995.

61 Balibar 1995, pp. 77-78.

62 Balibar 1973, p. 57.

63 Balibar 1973, pp. 57-58.

him as a *subject*, then the lifting of the illusion is still no more than a subjective, individual matter, however it is socially conditioned by the structure of the whole, and however much it is repeated 'millions of times over' for millions of individuals occupying similar places: it is only the effect of a different place or of coming to consciousness in one place.⁶⁴

Althusser returns to the theory of fetishism in the 1978 manuscript *Marx in his Limits*, which provides the the basic theoretical background to his interventions on the crisis of Marxism and the crisis of the communist movement. For Althusser the problem with the theory of fetishism is that it remains prisoner of an opposition between persons and things that in fact remains 'trapped in the categories of the law or in the notions of juridical ideology.'⁶⁵ For Althusser the problem is that in the theory of fetishism social relations between men are substituted by illusory relations between things, whereas the problem with juridical ideology is that social (exploitative) relations between men are substituted by juridical relations. 'The paradox is that Marx opposes relations between men to relations between things, whereas the reality of the law itself describes these relations in their unity.'⁶⁶ Moreover, Althusser accuses Marx of confusing the ideological illusions of the economists and fetishism as ideological illusion inherent in the world of commodities. In such an approach there is the danger of bracketing the reality beyond commodity exchange, namely the reality of exploitation, of workplace struggle etc. Moreover, Althusser insists that in such a conception of generalized commodity exchange within the capitalist mode of production we tend to underestimate the role of the state, we cannot understand how commodity relations 'could function without money minted by the state, transactions registered by state agencies, and courts capable of settling possible disputes'.⁶⁷ We can say that it is here Althusser links his critique of the theory of fetishism to his attempt to insist on the importance of state theory for Marxism.

Moreover, in this capitalist class society, the state and law [droit] adamantly continue to exist - not just private, mercantile

64 Balibar 1973, pp. 58-59.

65 Althusser 2006, p. 129.

66 Althusser 2006, p. 128

67 Althusser 2006, p. 132.

law, but also public, political law, which is, despite the term 'common law', of an altogether different sort; and there are also the ideologies, which the ideology of the dominant class strives to unify in the dominant ideology.⁶⁸

Moreover, it remains within the contours of a conception of labour as substance as opposed to its phenomenal appearances. For Althusser, this is also the result of Marx's own order of exposition that began from the simplest 'abstraction'.

Here he pays the price, for the first but not the last time, for having set off on an analysis of the capitalist mode of production (*Capital*) with a certain idea of the order of exposition that compelled him to 'begin' with the prescribed beginning: the simplest abstraction, value.⁶⁹

For Althusser the problem with any theory of fetishism is that it underestimates the concrete reality of the ideological role of the state, what he designates as the 'state's political-economical-ideological function as a machine for transforming the force that emanates from class struggle into power'.⁷⁰

It is obvious that we are dealing here with one of the most interesting and contradictory at the same time aspects of the entire Althusserian endeavour. It begins with Rancière's texts which in a certain way is one of the most acute readings of crucial aspects of value theory, in a certain sense preceding later theoretical intervention. It is important that Rancière insists that the crucial question is that of the emergence of value-form and that the 'absent cause' refers exactly social relations of production. It is interesting that Rancière's text in a certain way reminds us of Rubin's position that the emergence of the value-form and of commodity fetishism can only be explained by reference to capitalist social relations of production (even though in Rubin in many instances social relations of production refer mainly to market relations and a market based on independent commodity produces, not the relations *inside* capitalist

68 Althusser 2006, p. 133

69 Ibid.

70 Althusser 2006, p. 135.

production).⁷¹ It is also important to note that it precedes Hans-Georg Backhaus' 1969 text on the importance of value-form theory. The following passage from Backhaus' texts makes evident the analogies.

The value-form analysis is significant for Marx's social theory in a threefold respect: it is the point of confluence of sociology and economic theory; it inaugurates Marx's critique of ideology and a specific theory of money which founds the primacy of the sphere of production vis-a vis the sphere of circulation and thus of the relations of production vis-a-vis the 'superstructure'.⁷²

Rancière's text is also important for the fact that regarding the question of fetishism it focuses on Volume Three of *Capital* and the notion of the fetishism of capital. As both Enrique Dussel and John Milios and Dimitri Dimoulis have shown, is there and in the 1861-63 Manuscripts that we can see this particular conception of the fetishism of capital and not just the commodity fetishism.⁷³

4. The complex theorization of fetishism in Marx's work

If we look at the evolutions of Marx's own conceptualization of fetishism, we will that we can find the first references in the *Grundrisse* in passages that suggest something close to a theory of objectification and mystification of social relations.

The economists regard people's social relations of production, and the determinations acquired by things subsumed under these relations, as natural properties of the things. This crude materialism is an equally crude idealism, indeed a fetishism which ascribes to things social relations as determinations immanent to them, and thus mystifies them.⁷⁴

71 See Rubin 1973. It is interesting to note that the time that Rancière wrote his text there were not translations or editions available of Rubin's book.

72 Backhaus 1980, p. 112.

73 Dussel 2001; Dimoulis and Milios 2004.

74 MECW 29, p. 77

In a similar fashion in the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, fetishism appears in a footnote referring to the 'the fetishism of German "thinkers"'⁷⁵ and to a reference to the 'wealth as a fetish' in a section on money.⁷⁶ It is obvious that we are dealing not simply with commodity fetishism but with a more general reference to processes of objectification/mystification of social relations, with an emphasis more on money than simply commodities, something that brings us closer to the fetishism of value and capital rather than simple commodity fetishism.

A social relation of production appears as something existing apart from individual human beings, and the distinctive relations into which they enter in the course of production in society appear as the specific properties of a thing—it is this perverted appearance, this prosaically real, and by no means imaginary, mystification that is characteristic of all social forms of labour positing exchange value. This perverted appearance manifests itself merely in a more striking manner in money than it does in commodities.⁷⁷

It is in the 1861-63 Manuscript that Marx links fetishism to value and not commodity and in particular interest capital, exactly the point in Volume Three of *Capital* that Rancière turns his attention to. The following passage referring to the division of surplus value into industrial profit and interest is rather revealing in this sense:

Thus the nature of surplus value, the essence of capital and the character of capitalist production are not only completely obliterated in these two forms of surplus value, they are turned into their opposites. But even in so far as the character and form of capital are complete [it is] nonsensical [if] presented without any intermediate links and expressed as the subjectification of objects, the objectification of subjects, as the reversal of cause and effect, the religious *quid pro quo*, the pure form of capital expressed in the formula $M—M'$. The ossification of relations, their presentation as the relation of men to things having a definite social character is here likewise brought out in quite a different manner from that of

75 MECW 29, p. 277.

76 MECW 29, p. 387.

77 MECW 29, p. 289.

the simple mystification of commodities and the more complicated mystification of money. The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete.⁷⁸

In this sense fetishism emerges as a more general aspect of the capitalist mode of production, a particular mode of ideological inversion and mystification inscribed in not simply in the generalization of commodity exchange, but in capitalist social relations of production and in particular in the wage relation as a social relation and in the process of real subsumption of labour to capital, a part of the actual 'biopolitics' of capital.

Since living labour is incorporated into capital—through the exchange between capital and the worker—since it appears as an activity belonging to capital, as soon as the labour process starts, all the productive powers of social labour present themselves as productive powers of capital, just as the general social form of labour appears in money as the quality of a thing. Thus the productive power of social labour, and the specific forms of it, now present themselves as productive powers and forms of capital, of *objectified* labour, of the objective conditions of labour, which—as such an independent entity—are personified in the capitalist and confront living labour. Here once again we have the inversion of the relation, the expression of which we have already characterised as *fetishism* in considering the nature of money.⁷⁹

It is obvious from the above references that when Marx started working on *Capital* Volume One he has already moved towards a more comprehensive account of fetishism as a specifically capitalist mode of socially necessary miscognition, exemplified on the fact that a fetishistic conception of the profit and interest is necessary for the extended reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

78 MECW 32, p. 494.

79 MECW 34, p. 122.

5. Conclusion: The contradictory relation of Althusserianism to value-form theory

Now the question arises why both Rancière and Althusser discarded in the end the notion of fetishism as anthropological, idealistic, and -especially in the case of Rancière - a mystification of the collective envisioning of the struggling proletariat. One of the reasons has to do with their increased apprehension of the effectivity of social antagonism. In Althusser this takes the form of an insistence on the primacy of relations of production over productive forces and on the importance of autonomous popular struggles.⁸⁰ In Rancière this takes the form of a turn towards the modalities of proletarian subjectivity.

This emphasis on antagonistic relations of production, on struggles and movements, could easily lead to an underestimation of the importance of social forms and in particular of the social and ideological effectivity of the value-form. The reproduction of the capitalist mode of production does not depend only on the balance of force in production, but also the reproduction of a series of practices at the level of circulation. Capitalism is not simply extraction of surplus value; it is also the generalized expansion of the market, including money and capital markets.

At the same time, Althusser's post-1968 emphasis on the role of the state and a more political approach (in an analogy with Marx Althusser's own '1848' moment as the realization of the effectivity of both ideology and the state) can also lead to a certain misunderstanding of these forms of miscognition, arising out of the realm of economic practices. Two important points have to be made here. One is that the theory of the Ideological Apparatuses of the State is not a theory of the *origin* of ideological representations but of their *reproductions*. Ideological representations arise out of all aspects of social life, out of all social practices, economic, political, or discursive. ISA's are instrumental in order to turn them into more coherent ideological discourses and strategies and in order to reproduce them. The other is that the processes of the emergence of fetishistic representations are not outside the State or the practices of the State. The State is always already present both in the market and in the capitalist production process. The legal guarantee of the wage contract, and of money, the importance of State power to safeguard credit and the banking system, the role of bourgeois law in all aspects of the economy, all these attest that the social practices from which fetishistic

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Althusser 2014.

representations emerge, are always also conditioned by state apparatuses, their material interventions and discursive tropes, the class strategies inscribed in state apparatuses, and the ideological practice being reproduced in the ISAs.

Now 50 years after *Reading Capital*, in a conjuncture where we can see both the return of mass politics and the political effectivity of social and political antagonism, but also the pervasive effects of the expansion of money and capital markets, exemplified in the fetishistic neoliberal fantasies of auto-regulated markets, we can return to these debates and re-read texts that have lost nothing of their theoretical force.

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