

fashion is *used* in production, and it is *owned* by whomever owns the labour power which includes knowledge of it. Relations obtaining when tasks are divided as it prescribes are neither used nor owned.¹

Our insistence that material relations of production are not productive forces will appear less pedantic when we put the point to theoretical use in Chapter VI, section (6).

¹ See the criteria of productive forcehood listed on p. 41. It could be shown, at the cost of more discussion than seems worth while, that they all tell in favour of classifying the principle as a productive force, and against so classifying the relations themselves.

From ² Karl Marx's *Theory of History*
by G.A. Cohen

CHAPTER V

Fetishism¹(1) *Fetishism in Religion and in Economics*

To MAKE a fetish of something, or fetishize it, is to invest it with powers it does not in itself have.

The term 'fetish' derives from discourse about religion. In religious fetishism an activity of thought, a cultural process, vests an object with apparent power. Since thinking does not make things so, the religious fetish does not really acquire the power mentally referred to it. But if a culture makes a fetish of an object, its members come to perceive it as endowed with the power. What is mistakenly attributed to it is experienced as inhering in it. The fetish then manifests itself as endowed with a power which in truth it lacks. It has the power not in the real world but in the religious world, a world of illusion.

Marx identified several fetishes in the sphere of the economy. The commodity fetish is most famous, but the fetishism of capital is at least as important. The economic fetish is *partly* analogous with the religious fetish. It is endowed with a power which *in a sense*² it lacks, whereas the religious fetish simply lacks the power.³ And the appearance of power in the economic fetish does not result from a thought process, but from a process of production. It arises from the way production is organized in commodity society. It is 'inseparable from the production of commodities',⁴ and survives even when commodity production is clearly conceived: understanding does not 'dissipate the mist'⁵ through which the market economy is perceived. The false appearance is, rather like a mirage (and unlike a hallucination),

¹ This chapter presupposes the exposition of the idea of discrepancy between reality and appearance given in Appendix I. For a short statement of it, see p. 329.

² The sense is specified in section (2): it has the power, but not inherently.

³ Except in special cases. Suppose, for example, that the worshippers believe of an idolized object that if it fell off its pedestal, they would be stricken with frenzy. It is possible that they would, therefore, suffer a frenzy if it fell.

⁴ *Capital*, i. 72.

⁵ *Ibid.* i. 74. This is the translators' phrase, but it is apt.

located in the external world. In economic fetishism there is a gulf between reality and its own appearance. The mind registers the fetish. It does not, as in the religious case, create it.

(2) *What is True and What is False in Fetishism*

Commodities possess exchange-value, and capital is productive. But these powers belong to them only by grace of the material labour process. Yet they appear to inhere in them independently of it. That appearance is fetishism.

The religious fetish does not have the power it appears to have. The economic fetish does. The illusion is that it has the power inherently, whereas it is in fact delegated by material production. The time taken to produce a commodity takes the form of the exchange-value of the commodity.¹ The productivity of men working with means of production takes the form of the productivity of capital. The forms are visible, but their foundation in labouring activity is not. *The social forms conceal the material content.*

That products have exchange-value is a result, as we shall see (section (3)), of the way labour is organized, and how much exchange-value a product has depends on how much labour is spent on it. But exchange-value appears to transcend its material basis in labour and to derive from the substance of the commodity itself. The commodity really has exchange-value, but it seems to emanate from it, not from the labour which produces it. Exchange-value is a *social* relational property of a thing, and fetishism veils its source in *material* relations between persons.

We may summarize the doctrine of commodity fetishism as follows:

1. The labour of persons takes the form of the exchange-value of things.
2. Things do have exchange-value.
3. They do not have it autonomously.
4. They appear to have it autonomously.²

¹ Some of Marx's doctrine of fetishism is expressed in terms presupposing the labour theory of value. That is not the only theory which grounds value in material conditions of production, and most of the fetishism doctrine may be stated within a competing material theory, such as Sraffa's, in which value ratios are technically determined, but not by labour alone. Our exposition will not distinguish between a generally material and a specifically labour-theoretical account of value.

² Statements 2, 3, and 4 explicate 'takes the form of' as it is used in statement 1.

5. Exchange-value, and the illusion accompanying it, are not permanent, but peculiar to a determinate form of society.

To characterize capital fetishism, we need the distinction between physical production and value production. Physical production is the transformation of use-values into use-values by men employing means of production. Surplus physical production is physical production whose product exceeds what is required to sustain the producers and replace used up means of production. Physical production is universal, and surplus physical production is near-universal, missing only in primitive society. Value production is specific to market economies, where the product has not only use-value but exchange-value. It is the production of the product as a value. Surplus value production is the production of more value than the value of what is used up in the productive process.

Now capital is doubly productive. First, it is value productive, because it yields a financial return: it is released, and it comes back with surplus value attached. But that surplus *value* reflects the creation of surplus *physical product*: exchange-value expands only because the productive process creates more use-value than it consumes.

Capital is also physically productive. For it is embodied in labour power (as variable capital) and means of production (as constant capital), and it is their action, hence the action of capital, which produces physical output. The physical productivity of capital depends on its being thus embodied.

Yet capital's power to produce, in both senses, appears to be a faculty inherent in it, not one it owes to the labour process.¹

We found two phases in commodity fetishism: (1) separation of exchange-value from its material basis; (2) attachment of exchange-value to the substance of the commodity. The two phases of capital fetishism are more subtly distinguished. First, productivity is separated from its basis in material production, and attributed to exchange-value itself, to capital. Then productivity is referred back to labour power and means of production as physical embodiments of capital. They appear productive in virtue of being embodiments of capital, whereas in fact

¹ See, e.g., *Grundrisse*, pp. 745, 758, and the references in notes to section (4) below.

capital is productive in virtue of its embodiment in them.¹

Summary of the doctrine of capital fetishism:

1. The productivity of men operating with physical facilities takes the form of the productivity of capital.²
2. Capital is productive.
3. It is not autonomously productive.
4. It appears to be autonomously productive.
5. Capital, and the illusion accompanying it, are not permanent, but peculiar to a determinate form of society.

Capital fetishism is expounded above with special reference to *industrial* capital, capital embodied in labour power and means of production. In fetishized perception industry produces because capital animates it, while in reality the life of capital is entirely due to physical production. Still, the fetishism of industrial capital does assign a role to material production, albeit the reverse of its true role.

Capital fetishism reaches a higher stage in the fetishism of *interest-bearing* capital, which, by attracting interest, appears to expand of its own accord, without the intervention of production. 'The relationship of capital to labour is obliterated',³ and surplus value, which is 'the result of the capitalist process of production—divorced from the process—acquires an independent existence'.⁴ According to Marx, 'some vulgar economists' suppose that interest would continue to accrue even if all capitalists only loaned their capital, and none used it productively.⁵

The interest payment is in fact derived from the surplus value generated by production: profit and interest are parts of it, redounding to distinct capitalists. But the route from physical production to interest is so indirect that here 'the production of surplus value appears purely as an occult property' of capital.⁶ It is, after all, possible for interest to accrue, for a limited time,

¹ *Capital*, iii. 84, 105, 728; *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 264, 274; 'Results', pp. 1052-6, 1058.

² *Capital*, i. 606-7; *Theories of Surplus Value*, i. 389.

³ *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 489.

⁴ *Capital*, iii. 384-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, i. 370.

⁶ *Ibid.* iii. 595. Cf. *ibid.* iii. 390, 456, 467, 479, 560-1, 794; *Grundrisse*, p. 375; *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 453-68, 486. The fetishisms of industrial and interest-bearing capital are compared at *ibid.* iii. 473-4, 476-8, 489-90, 492-5, 514-15.

without the mediation of production.¹ (An industrial capitalist whose plant is idle may still meet interest payments.)

In developed capitalism it is almost always a sum of money, or some comparably use-valueless entity, whose loan attracts more than itself in return. Gain from money lending met with hostility in pre-capitalist times, and it seems that interest-bearing capital was first tolerated when the principal was a use-value, such as a supply of seed, which could be seen to contribute materially to production.² Interest fetishism is limited when the principal is materially embodied.

(3) *Diagnosis of Commodity Fetishism*

Commodity fetishism is the appearance that products have value in and of themselves, apart from the labour bestowed on them. Why are commodities fetishes? Why does the labour which constitutes their value fail to appear to do so?

That commodities are fetishes does not derive from the fact that they are use-values. All products are use-values, but only when they are produced as commodities are they fetishes. No more does the fetish character result from the fact that commodities are products of a certain amount and a certain kind of labour: all products are. Nor, finally, is it grounded in the fact that commodity production is not only material production but production within a social form. All production proceeds within a social form.³

Mystery arises not because there is a social form, but because of the particular social form it is. The enigma 'comes clearly from this form itself'.⁴ 'What matters is the specific manner in which the social character of labour is established.'⁵ *Mystery arises because the social character of production is expressed only in exchange, not in production itself.* The product lacks social form anterior to its manifestation as a commodity. The commodity form alone connects producing units in market society. In other economies their labours are integrated from the start, by custom, directive, or plan: as producers they already have claims on one

¹ See *Capital*, iii. 342-3, 438.

² See Plekhanov, *The Monist View*, p. 87; Weber, *General Economic History*, p. 201; Mandel, *Marxist Economic Theory*, p. 100.

³ This paragraph summarizes a long passage at *Capital*, i. 71.

⁴ *Ibid.* i. 71-2.

⁵ *Critique of Political Economy*, p. 32.

another, or on society at large. In commodity production there is no such integration: producers connect only mediately, through exchange, not as producers but as marketeers. Commodities are immediately social and producers' relations are only indirectly so.

The social form is thus alienated from the productive content, and it dominates it. Social relations between things assert themselves against material relations between persons who lack *direct* social relations.¹ It appears that men labour because their products have value, whereas in fact they have value because labour has been bestowed on them.² Men do not recognize their own authorship of the value through which alone they relate, and which therefore regulates their lives as producers. They are thus in a quite specific sense alienated from their own power, which has passed into things.

Marx contrasts market society with social forms whose production is immediately social, and therefore as transparent as Robinson Crusoe's dealings with nature. He instances primitive communism, production in a patriarchal tribe, feudalism, and the future free association of producers. In patriarchal society the product bears 'the specific social imprint of the family relationship':³ it is from the beginning destined, and known to be destined, and only produced because it is destined, to be consumed by some member of the family, or the family as a whole. And the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for all other non-commodity production: 'the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour, appear . . . as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour'.⁴ The product is socially impregnated *before* it circulates, in virtue of a nexus of duties or agreements between people. But under commodity production it shows a social character only in so far as it circulates, in commodity form. Mysterious exchange-value alone integrates dispersed producers. When production is not *ab initio* social an illusiogenic market is required to link men's labours behind their backs.

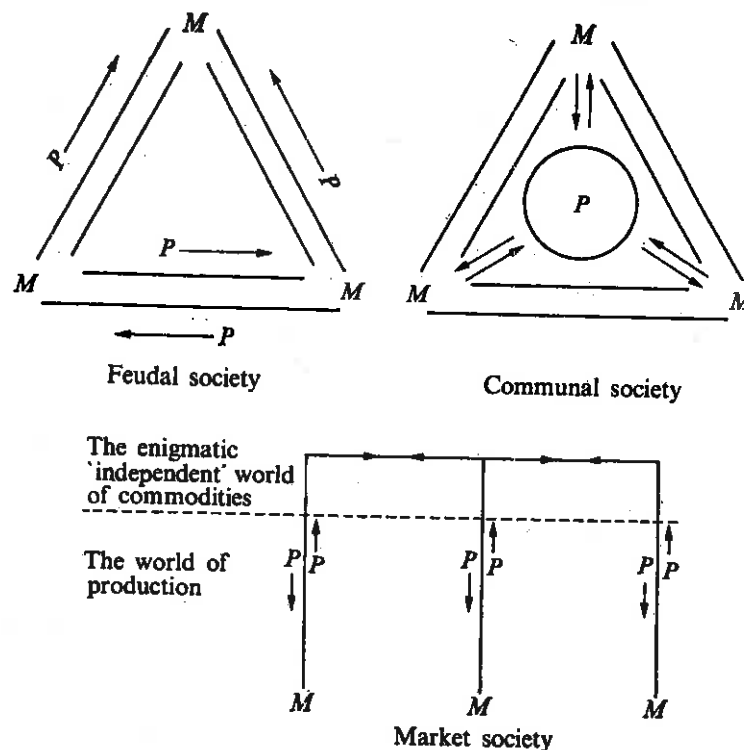
¹ *Capital*, i. 73.

² See *Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 86.

³ *Critique of Political Economy*, p. 33. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 34; *Capital*, i. 77-9; Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, pp. 428-9.

⁴ *Capital*, i. 77.

DIAGNOSIS OF COMMODITY FETISHISM



The differences are depicted in the diagram. The *M*'s are men, the *P*'s products. Parallel lines represent bonds obtaining between men and in virtue of which products change hands. Arrows indicate the movement of products between them. First, feudal society is shown, with traditional claims of particular persons on one another. (The figure at the top is the lord, to whom products are due, but who does not, in his turn, supply any to producers.) Then we have communal production, in which each contributes to and takes from an aggregate product.¹ Finally, market society, whose 'purely atomic'² members are in

¹ 'Within the cooperative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labour employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labour no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labour.' 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', pp. 22-3. Cf. *Grundrisse*, pp. 171-3.

² *Capital*, i. 92.

serial disconnection, linked only *via* exchange of products. The diagram portrays the duplication of worlds peculiar to commodity production. The explanation of commodity fetishism is that *if elements (here producers) which must be united are initially severed, they come to be joined indirectly on an alienated plane, in illusory forms. Division in what needs to be unified leads to duplication: a second world arises to confer a surrogate coherence on the fragmented elements.* (Section (6) shows the incidence of this explanatory pattern in other parts of Marx's thought.)

(4) *Diagnosis of Capital Fetishism*

We found in Marx a unitary account of the cause of commodity fetishism. In a phrase, it is lack of social connection between producers *as* producers. His explanation of the source of capital fetishism has a more complex texture. Here are some of its strands:

1. Under capitalism production is wholly dependent on capital, which advances its prerequisites, and regulates it from beginning to end. The means of production are available only as capital,¹ and it is only as (variable) capital that labour power can operate. The capitalist thus appears as the producer (or 'manufacturer'²), and the labourers as his instruments, 'incorporated in capital'.³ Because capital is sovereign over the entire productive process, the power of that process appears as due to capital.

This fetishism, incipient at the stage of formal subjugation,⁴ becomes

all the more real the more . . . labour power itself becomes so modified . . . that it is powerless as an independent force . . . outside this capitalist relationship, and that its independent capacity to produce is destroyed.⁵

Because the extra productive power that comes of combining many labourers together

¹ *Grundrisse*, p. 822.

² In a curious transformation of meaning (evincing capital fetishism?) a *manufacturer* is now properly so called only in so far as he *makes* nothing, or at least *makes* nothing with his hands.

³ *Grundrisse*, pp. 267, 297-8, 308; *Capital*, ii. 378, 385, iii. 26, 45.

⁴ See Ch. IV, p. 101, on the formal and real subjugations of labour to capital.

⁵ *Theories of Surplus Value*, i. 391. Cf. 'Results', p. 1024.

costs capital nothing, and because . . . the labourer himself does not develop it before his labour belongs to capital, it appears as a power with which capital is endowed by nature—a productive power that is immanent in capital.¹

In his reduced condition, the worker cannot exert power without capital, so his power appears as the power of capital.

2. Capital's productivity is contingent on its command of the material element which is by nature productive: labour power. Yet although the amount of surplus value *created* in an enterprise depends entirely on the amount of capital it has invested in labour power (as opposed to machines, raw materials, etc.), the amount of surplus value that *redounds* to the enterprise is directly proportional to the *total* capital invested in it, in all factors of production.² Labour-intensive industries have a higher rate of profit-creation but the same rate of profit-appropriation as other industries. Competition induces an equalizing flow of surplus value in the direction of industries with greater investment in means of production. But this theoretically validated distinction between the locus of profit-generation and the locus of profit-accrual is not exhibited on the surface of reality, to unreflective observation. It therefore appears that what determines the amount of profit the capitalist *receives*, namely his total capital, also *creates* that profit, so that capital as such, and not particularly as invested in labour power, appears productive.³

3. Commercial capital (the capital of the merchant who engages in trade as opposed to production) makes no contribution to the total fund of surplus value, but competition ensures that it is remunerated on the same terms as industrial capital. This fortifies the impression that it is capital as such which is productive, and that in the industrial case actual production is only a means for the exercise of its power.⁴ It is natural to suppose that it cannot be because of material production that capital is productive, when it so forcibly appears to produce

¹ *Capital*, i. 333. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 360; *Capital*, iii. 627; *Grundrisse*, pp. 528-9, 585, 700-2; *Grundrisse* (Berlin), pp. 955, 960; *Theories of Surplus Value*, i. 305, 389, 391-2.

² *Capital*, iii. part 2; *Theories of Surplus Value*, ii. Ch. 10.

³ *Grundrisse*, pp. 684, 759, 822; *Capital*, iii. 35, 47-8, 137, 165, 168, 172; *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 482-3.

⁴ *Grundrisse*, pp. 632 n., 662; *Capital*, iii. 807.

without material production, in commerce, and in the hands of the recipient of interest payments.¹

4. We noted that labour seems creative only as variable capital. It appears, moreover, that it only creates that part of the value of the product which is equal to the part of capital advanced as wages. In appearance the worker is rewarded for *all* of his labour, not merely for the part necessary to reproduce his own existence. Accordingly, 'the unpaid part seems necessarily to come not from labour but from capital, and not from the variable part of capital but from capital as a whole'.²

(5) *Commodity Fetishism and Money*

Capitalist society transforms quality into quantity. *Every* society embraces a set of interdependent producers, performing specific, qualitatively different material services for one another. But in a commodity economy this mutual provisioning takes place only in so far as the products achieve quantitative expression, as sums of exchange-value. Money, which is exchange-value divorced from use-value, perfects the alienated mediation of producers. 'The fact that the *exchange-value* of the commodity assumes an independent existence in money' reflects their disconnection as producers. In order that they may be connected,

the definite, particular labour of the private individual must manifest itself as its opposite, as equal, necessary, general labour and, in this form, social labour.³

Sociality can appear only 'in this form', in the money value of labour's product, which represents just the quantity of labour bestowed upon it.

Yet 'money can possess a social property only because individuals have alienated their own social relationships by embodying them in a thing'.⁴ In precommodity society men have claims on others in virtue of the roles they occupy *vis-à-vis* one another. The need for mediation through money varies inversely with the strength of direct social ties:

¹ See *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 478, 492-3, on how the fetishism of interest reinforces the fetishism of industrial capital.

² Marx to Engels, 30 Apr. 1868, *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 191-2. This aspect of the matter is explained more fully in Appendix I, pp. 327-8, 333-4.

³ *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 130. Cf. *ibid.* iii. 135-7, 144-5; *Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 33-4; *Capital*, i. 77, iii. 560-1.

⁴ *Grundrisse*, p. 160 and cf. *ibid.*, p. 223 ff.; *Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 35, 49.

The less social power the medium of exchange possesses . . . the greater must be the power of the community which binds the individuals together, the patriarchal relation, the community of antiquity, feudalism and the gild system. [In market society] each individual possesses social power in the form of a thing. Rob the thing of this social power and you must give it to persons to exercise over persons.¹

The bourgeois revolution abolishes immediate subjection of man to man. Feudal constraints, enabling *x* to direct *y* just in virtue of who *x* and *y* are, come to an end, and no orders are valid except where the recipient has contracted to accept them. Bourgeois ideology celebrates the disappearance of the old bonds, but the new 'seeming mutual independence of the individuals is supplemented by a general and mutual dependence through or by means of the products'.² The rule of things is the price of bourgeois freedom.

Still, 'rob the thing of this social power and you must give it to persons to exercise over persons'. The sentence seems to favour the bourgeois claim that the suppression of the market would lead to political tyranny, and not the equality socialists preoccupied with capitalist inequality promise. Marx is sympathetic to this claim for stages of productive development short of abundance. (See Chapter VII, section (6).) But at very high levels of industry 'the power of the community' will not be exercised by some persons over others.

(6) *Commodity Fetishism, Religion, and Politics*

The explanation of commodity fetishism was: when elements which need to be united are not united directly they are joined *ab extra* through a duplicate world of illusion. In tendering this account Marx was bringing to the economic domain a form of diagnosis he applied rather earlier to religion. His Fourth Thesis on Feuerbach:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can

¹ *Grundrisse*, pp. 157-8 and cf. *ibid.*, pp. 162-5.

² *Capital*, i. 108.

only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis.¹

Schism in the primary world generates a second world, illusory in itself, and masking the first one.

Feuerbach does root religion in life, but he fails to see that religion will erupt as long, and only as long, as there is conflict in real life: division in the real world is necessary and sufficient for its reproduction as a religious one.

Feuerbach merits praise and blame exactly analogous to what Marx later assigned to classical political economy. The classical economists (more or less) noticed the source of exchange-value in labour time. But, in analogy with Feuerbach's error of omission, they failed to recognize that labour time takes the form of exchange-value—this blinding 'halo'²—only because producers are fragmented. They supposed instead that it is of the nature of labour time to take on this appearance.³

Feuerbach and the classical economists are commended for not taking religion and exchange-value, respectively, at 'face value'. They know the phenomenon is not autonomous, and are therefore superior to 'believers'. The believers in the economic instance are the *vulgar* economists who, like the religious, mistake illusion for independent reality.

Recall the five statements of the summary on pages 116–17. Marx knows the truth of all of them. The classical economists fail to appreciate the fifth, and are unoccupied with the question to which the fourth is an answer. The vulgar economists are unaware of the first, are therefore ignorant of the third, and taken in by the appearance mentioned in the fourth. The only truth they know is the second.

Vulgar economy alone makes value intrinsic to things:

... it is characteristic of labour based on private exchange that the social character of labour 'manifests' itself in a perverted form—as the 'property' of things; that a social relation appears as a

¹ 'Theses on Feuerbach', p. 646.

² See 'Introduction to *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*', p. 42.

³ There is also some disanalogy, since Feuerbach hoped religion would be eliminated, while the classical economists thought of exchange-value as permanent. Feuerbach was nevertheless like them in not seeing religion as tied to a specific social reality. He therefore thought mere intellectual criticism could dispel it. (See Appendix I, pp. 339 ff. on the impotence of intellectual criticism as solvent of religious and economic illusions alike.)

relation between things (between products, values in use, commodities). This *appearance* is accepted as something real by our fetish-worshipper, and he actually believes that the exchange-value of things is determined by their properties as things, and is altogether a natural property of things.¹

The vulgar economist accepts the concepts the capitalist uses in his business practice and systematizes them. Since the underlying reality is irrelevant to business practice—what concerns the capitalist is not the source of value but how he may obtain some—it goes unnoticed in vulgar economy. Classical political economy penetrates beneath surface categories, but it thinks that what lies beyond them is naturally and inevitably expressed in them. Thereby it prepares the ground for the vulgarian *démarche*, offering 'the vulgar economists a secure basis of operations for their shallowness, which on principle worships appearances only'.² A relation between men, exchange of labours, manifests itself only as a relation between things, equivalence of value. In not recognizing the second as but a *transient* form of the first, the classical encouraged the vulgarians to drop the first altogether.

Marx holds that exchange-value necessarily dominates society when producers are divided from one another. The economists—classical and vulgar—do not see that exchange-value achieves sway only because production is divided, and therefore cannot conceive an alternative economy in which exchange-value, money, and capital cease to regulate the social order. Compare, finally, the petty bourgeois socialists, such as Proudhon in France and Gray in England. They wish to preserve privatized production, but to abolish the domination of exchange-value and capital. Hence their crackpot schemes to eliminate money and substitute for it labour chits, which would in time acquire all the characteristics of money, as long as producers remain fragmented. Their futile proposals compose a programme in which 'goods are to be produced as commodities but not exchanged as com-

¹ *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 130. Marx surely goes too far here. It is doubtful that value has ever been conceived so purely physically by any economist, however vulgar. The vulgar economist (e.g. Samuel Bailey, whom Marx is discussing at this point in *Theories*) is, after all, pleased to emphasize the role of demand in value creation, and that puts value in relation to people, however onesidedly and inadequately.

² *Capital*, i. 538. Cf. *ibid.* ii. 372; *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 501.

modities'. They do not appreciate that escape from the rule of exchange-value is possible only when production itself is revolutionized, and becomes the joint enterprise of associated men.¹

Our last illustration of the theme that division leads to duplication concerns the state.

According to *The Jewish Question*, it is because men are in conflict in their real life that they must solidarize in an ideal and false life as formally equal citizens. The state is a second and illusory society, which must be transcended:

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognised and organised his own powers as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power.²

The Jewish Question is pre-historical materialist. A transitional text is *The German Ideology*, in which the state as illusory community and the state as organ of class rule receive equal emphasis, sometimes side by side.³ But even the mature idea of the political superstructure has some analogy with the doctrine of commodity fetishism. The five statements on pages 116-17 are matched by these:

1. Class antagonism takes the form of political conflict.
2. There is specifically political conflict.
3. Political conflict is not autonomous but derivative.
4. It appears, however, to be autonomous.
5. Political conflict, the state, and the associated illusions are not permanent, but peculiar to class divided societies.

In a much-quoted early letter Marx credited bourgeois historians with discovery of the importance of class struggle, reserving for himself the honour of having determined that classes and their conflict are limited to a finite stretch of history.⁴

¹ *Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 84-6. Cf. *Grundrisse*, pp. 158-9; *Capital*, i. 94-5 n.; *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 296, 472, 523-7; Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, p. 434.

² 'On the Jewish Question', p. 31. Cf. *German Ideology*, p. 46.

³ e.g. *German Ideology*, pp. 89, 91.

⁴ Marx to Weydemeyer, 5 Mar. 1852, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 64.

This nicely parallels his conception of his advance beyond Ricardo, who did not understand how exchange-value 'is only bound up with *particular, historic phases in the development of production*'.¹

(7) *Communism as the Liberation of the Content*

Fetishism protects capitalism. When the social form arrogates to itself the energy of the content, it makes itself appear eternal, 'simply human',² like the content itself. This is reflected in the discourse of the economists, which feigns a 'direct coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social determination'.³ The fruits of living labour are attributed to the capital form imprisoning it.⁴ The stunting quality of labour under capitalism is conceived as belonging to labouring as such.⁵ There is then no prospect of liberation from capital, for labour.

The socialist revolution suppresses fetishism, and the condition of communism to which it leads may be described as the *conquest of form by matter*. For in negating exchange-value communism releases the content fetishized economy imprisoned in form. It subjects the social to the individual, thus exactly reversing fetishism. The following passage reminds us of the structure of commodity fetishism and supports the interpretation of communism advanced in this section:

The very necessity of first transforming the products or activities of the individual into *exchange-value*, into *money*, so that they hold and display their social *power* in the form of things, proves two things: (1) that individuals now produce only for society and in society; (2) that production is not *directly* social, is not the offspring of an association which distributes labour within itself. Individuals are subsumed under social production, which operates like destiny behind their backs; but social production is not subsumed under individuals, managed by them as their common wealth.⁶

In communism individuals reclaim the power which is properly their own but which has congealed in social structure.

¹ *Idem*.

² See Ch. IV, pp. 98-9.

³ *Capital*, iii. 809.

⁴ *Theories of Surplus Value*, iii. 273-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

⁶ *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

Use-value supplants exchange-value, and 'the material process of production is stripped of its miserable and antagonistic form'.¹ Nor is there, as in the regime before exchange-value conquered, extra-economic coercion binding men. There is just a 'free development of individualities',² in voluntary association. For communism makes 'it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals'.³ Contemplated here is a conjoint liberation of people and their productive powers. Individuals in control of historically transformed nature take over, and the reign of form ends.

Fetishism is part of the price paid for the development of production sponsored by capitalism. With fetishism the form not only dominates the content but obscures it. When communism subdues the form and enfranchises matter, obscurity retreats, and science is no longer required for human self-understanding.⁴

The form prevails because it develops the content: it is the function of society to transform nature.⁵ Does it follow that, once nature is developed, society withers away? Does communism not only subject form to matter, but abolish it? Is communism formless? The answer is complicated.

Certainly communism ends the *constriction* of matter by form. It frees the material side: use-value, productive forces, individuals. But does it not *have* a social form?

A social form is a structure, an ordering of relations between persons. The total disappearance of form, so understood, is a Utopian notion. 'From the moment that men in any way work for one another, their labour assumes a social form',⁶ and men work for one another under communism. But a reduction of the *scope* of form, and a change of *relation* between form and matter—these are not Utopian notions.

Since communism promises a decreasing working day, it contracts the sphere of the economy. The form of the economy, and its weight in men's lives, contract in step. As for activity

¹ *Grundrisse*, pp. 705-6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 706.

³ *German Ideology*, p. 87, and cf. *ibid.*, pp. 83-4, 91.

⁴ See Appendix I, pp. 336-8.

⁵ See Ch. I, pp. 23-4.

⁶ *Capital*, i. 71.

outside the economic zone, it is described as 'the free development of human energy',¹ which sounds like something so spontaneous as to be the opposite of anything which has a form.

But perhaps the real point is this: activity under communism, both within and outside its economy, is not unstructured, but it is also not pre-structured. No social form is *imposed* upon it, but it does have a form. One might say: *the form is now just the boundary created by matter itself*. The structure displayed by communism is no more than the outline of the activities of its members, not something into which they must fit themselves. These obscure statements will now be clarified, through attention to a neglected aspect of the idea of the abolition of the division of labour.

It is known that the state withers away under communism. But the state is not the only structure due for retirement. The social structure will also subside. The liberated association of individuals is less a new social structure than freedom from social structure:

For the proletarians . . . the condition of their existence, labour, and with it all the conditions of existence governing modern society, have become something accidental, something over which they, as separate individuals, have no control, and over which no *social* organization can give them control.²

Liberation entails release of the content, and the unfettered effusion of productive power:

. . . previous revolutions within the framework of division of labour were bound to lead to new political institutions; . . . the communist revolution, which removes the division of labour, ultimately abolishes political institutions; and finally . . . the communist revolution will be guided not by the 'social institutions of inventive socially-gifted persons', but by the productive forces.³

We need a reading of the division of labour which makes its abolition coincide with the suppression of social structure. This we now try to provide.

¹ *Capital*, iii. 800.

² *German Ideology*, p. 94.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 416 (quoting Max Stirner). Compare Lichtheim's perceptive description of the proletarian revolution as 'the act whereby the industrial revolution escapes from bourgeois control'. *Marxism*, p. 56.

Marx prophesied the disappearance of the division of labour in a celebrated passage of *The German Ideology*. We do not know whether this early prophecy was already accompanied by the belief he later expressed in the withering away of labour itself, as activity geared to economic ends.¹ It is unclear whether the attractively varied activity sketched below was supposed to constitute production, or take place outside it. Whatever the answer to that question may be, the passage illuminates the idea of the suppression of form:

... as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.²

Marx here attributes three desirable features to activity—be it labour or not—in future society. First, a person does not give himself up to one activity only. Second, he does not relate to any of his several activities as to a role in a fixed social structure. And third, what he does is something he wishes to do. It is the second feature which demands examination here.

Communist man hunts, fishes, herds sheep, and criticizes, 'without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic'. We submit that the quoted phrase adds to the initial assertion of variation in activity. This man is not even successively a hunter, fisherman, and critic, though he does hunt, fish, and criticize. For he is in none of these activities entering a position in a structure of roles, in such a way that he could identify himself, if only for the time being, as a hunter, etc. The thought we are trying to elicit is perhaps more apparent here:

... with a communist organisation of society, there disappears

¹ See *Capital*, iii. 800, quoted below in Ch. XI, p. 324.

² *German Ideology*, pp. 44–5.

the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the artist to some definite art, thanks to which he is exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc., *the very name of his activity adequately expressing the narrowness of his professional development* and his dependence on division of labour. In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities.¹

We deny that the last sentence says: 'In a communist society there are no full-time painters but at most part-time painters.' People do paint, but the status 'painter' is not assumed even from time to time.

The abolition of roles is an exacting prescription, but Marx imposed it on future society. The reproach that he sought a complete absorption of the individual in society states the reverse of his aim. Having complained that in modern times 'a banker plays a great part, but mere man . . . a very shabby part',² he would not be impressed by a jack-of-all-roles, who is other than mere man, whatever he took that to be. He wanted individuals to face one another and themselves 'as such', without the mediation of institutions.³ For institutions represent 'fixation of social activity, consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us'.⁴ It is no great exaggeration to say that Marx's freely associated individuals constitute an alternative to, not a form of, society.

¹ *German Ideology*, pp. 431–2, emphases added.

² *Capital*, i. 44, and cf. *Grundrisse*, p. 248.

³ *German Ideology*, p. 84, and see also, p. 49. Recall the use of 'as such' to restrict attention to the material side of things and persons: see Ch. IV above, pp. 89–91.

⁴ *German Ideology*, p. 45.