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# The Root Structures of Reification

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(TRANSLATION)

As though old Marx directed everything from his grave, the commodity form has contributed, by the logic of its real development, to enlightening and deepening the critique of political economy. As bourgeois and bureaucrats, the heirs of this critique have, of course, done everything theoretically and practically to conceal or maintain the confusion about the subject by drowning it under a load of metaphysical subtleties and theological arguments. But the world has gone on without them. Marx transcribed with a blinding clarity into the mundane everyday the analyses the bourgeois and the bureaucrats do all they can to dissimulate. He gave to the theory of fetishism of commodity an objective truth and an experienced banality which brought it within the understanding of everyone.

The commodity has maintained itself as a form despite the minor setbacks it has suffered since Marx. A form that masks the products of creative activity (of the praxis) that wage labor has deprived of all humanity. A form that — as a faithful heir to the old Judeo-Christian God — has acquired an autonomous existence and created man and world in its image. A form that gave birth to the anthropology of an isolated individual who remained deprived of the riches of his social relationships. The commodity is the praxis of power: not only the dissolutive principle of the old peasant-religious civilization (the remains of which it is still tracking down) but a mode of representation of the world and a form of action upon it. It has acquired the totality of social reality to

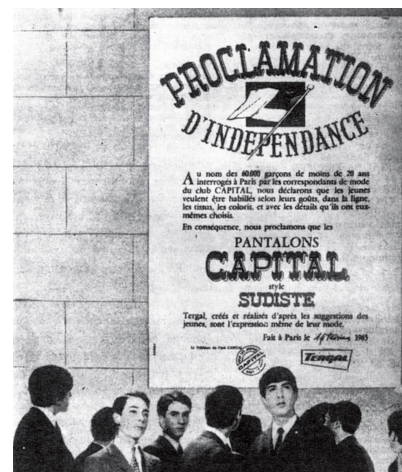
the quantifiable and installed the totalitarian domination of the quantitative, even extending it to those areas of life that have not yet been dominated.

What seemed to be the most concrete was in fact the most abstract; a formal rationalization, an illusion. But such an illusion (once it has acquired its autonomy) acts unlike a revolutionary idea by inciting to submission in the real world.

The prevailing society always advances and reaches new heights in the escalation of repression and alienation. By combining the fetishism of the commodity with the fetishism of the work of art, the “cybernated state” has summoned a fetishism at its own level: the commodity spectacle which is a projection of *all life* into a hypostasized and crystallized essence, ghost and scaled-down model of life itself. The concentration of alienations has developed parallel to the concentration of capital. Competitive capitalism was satisfied with crushing social man with a host of partial alienations. Bureaucratic capitalism, by reducing the old separate spheres to one reification, and on the road to a rapid cybernation, deep-freezes social man and puts him in the shop-window.

Such a process and the prospective of its end could only be unforeseeable for bourgeois thought and still-born structuralist thought. In fact a structural analysis could have deduced from the commodity form the totality of the society it produces and which reproduces it, including the ideology it contains. This ideology was incapable of going through such an analysis since it only unconsciously expressed the structures of the reification processes underway

and erected them into an ahistorical absolute.



## L'indépendance de la marchandise

L'autonomie de la marchandise est à la racine de la dictature de l'apparence ; de la tautologie fondamentale du *spectacle*, où l'importance est toute présupposée et définie par la mise en scène de l'importance. Le pseudo-événement préfabriqué qui y domine et oriente le réel, c'est un événement qui n'est plus visible pour ce qu'il contient, mais qui n'a pas d'autre contenu que d'être *visible*. Que peuvent exprimer de plus grandiose les pantalons Capital, par exemple, forts de la soumission de leurs milliers de *ressortissants* recensés; soumission dont, on ne manque pas de l'afficher, ils « ont eux-mêmes choisi » les détails ? Précisément ce que ces fétiches proclament : ils sont « l'expression même de leur mode ». Ce sudisme esclavagiste des marchandises se présente évidemment comme indiscutable devant le bétail humain qu'il a marqué. Rarement une image publicitaire d'une telle débilite d'invention concertée aura si bien su exprimer *inconsciemment* la scission entre les hommes et leur obiectivation ; la rébellion insolente de leurs propres actes qui se retour-

ment contre eux comme une puissance étrangère. Tous les désirs de l'époque sont suspendus à notre victoire dans cette guerre de Sécession.

Undertaken during the Renaissance, the bourgeoisie's old work of negation was accomplished haphazardly and always on time. The unitary society dissolved long ago is replaced by emptiness, an emptiness presented as the only possible. To this micro-society that organized itself around unities real enough though limited in quantity and quality (village, family, guild, etc.), emptiness has substituted a cohort of reified *abstractions*: the individual, the state, the consumer, the market et. al. that drew their apparent reality from the appearance of reality they have assumed in our lives.

The principles of formal logic (which penetrated the City with the first merchants) find their full realization in the commodity-spectacle. The principle of *identity* is to the commodity what the category of totality is to the revolutionary movement. In the structure of the commodity form — prior to its overwhelming expansion — the general identity of commodities was only obtainable by subverting the fictitious identification into a general abstract equivalent. This illusory identity, assumed daily, succeeded in penetrating the identity of all needs and therefore of all consumers, and in this way achieves a certain degree of reality. The full realization — the complete identity — of the old abstract equivalence would be the climax of this process. Due to this dilation, the area of cultural production, or publicity, has more and more trouble differentiating between products and so prophesizes the great tautology to come.

The commodity, like the bureaucracy, is a formalization and a rationalization of praxis: its reduction to some *thing* that can be dominated and manipulated. In the end, social reality under this domination reduces itself to two contradictory meanings: a bureaucratic-commodity meaning (which on another level corresponds to exchange value) and a real meaning. The bureaucratization of capitalism does not mean an inner qualitative transformation, but on the contrary is an extension of the commod-

ity form. The commodity was always bureaucratic.

The spectacular-commodity form parodies the revolutionary project of the mastery of the environment, natural and social, by a humanity become master of itself and its history. The spectacular-commodity presides over the domination of an isolated and abstract individual in an environment organized by power. If it is true that men are the products of their conditions, it is sufficient to create inhuman conditions to reduce them to the state of things. In the organization of the commodity atmosphere, as in the principles of communicating vessels, "Man" is reduced to the state of things, and things in return assume human qualities. The magazine *Elle* can use the publicity title: "These furnishings live" — yes, off our very lives. *Man is the world of man.*

Nietzsche notes that a "predominance of rice in diet leads to the use of opium and narcotics. As a predominance of potatoes leads to the use of alcohol. Which agrees with the fact that pushers of narcotic thought-fashions as well as Hindu philosophers advocate a purely vegetarian diet. They want to make of this diet a law for the masses. Seeking thus to awaken needs they alone could satisfy, they and not others." But in a society that can only secrete the need for another life, the opium of commodity-spectacle is but a mock realization of this sole real want. Through the commodity form and its shows, the society of the spectacle tends to crumble this sole want by giving it a host of illusory and partial satisfactions. In exchange for the surrender of the possible — in other words, another society — it generously grants us all the possibilities of being *other* in this one.

The commodity-spectacle colonizes the possible by delineating with police methods the practical and theoretical horizon of the time. In the Middle Ages, the religious framework seemed to be the insurmountable horizon within which all class struggles had to take place. The spectacular-commodity form tends to create for itself a similar framework in the midst of which all struggles — already lost — for total emancipation would take place.

Even though the commodity form,

while monopolizing reality, only lived in the 19th century bourgeois mind, this nightmare of a society is but a lived — an outlived — ideology, an organization of appearances that only rises to an appearance of organization. In fact, the spectacle is but the fantastic realization of the commodity because the commodity never had a true reality. The commodity's mysterious characteristic rests simply on the fact that it mirrors the characteristics of men's lives, but reflects these characteristics back to men as objective. Power thus projects the image of survival as power allows it and adds elements to it that sometimes contain a liberatory potential, always opening on the possible. Through this operation, these elements pass into the service of repression, in making alienation more palatable after it's been adorned by the flowers of criticism.

The reveries of the dominant classes are far more and more revealing to those who can decipher the social context of the period. Nothing less than the construction of an abstract society (abstract from society) where abstract spectators would abstractly consume abstract things. Thus, the highly desired conjunction between ideology and reality would be achieved: its portrayal becoming an image of the world, and in the end substituting the image for the world to build the mirror-world created by power and sold on the market. The conscious representation of one's life as a product of one's own activity would then disappear from the consumer-spectator's mind who could then watch the spectacle of his own consumption.

The cybernetician's conception of going beyond philosophy agrees with the conception's dream of reconstructing, on the basis of the society of the spectacle, the lost paradise of the unitarian societies by pouring into it 2000 years of development in social alienation. By the way, those dreams reveal the slyly concealed and mystified character of these societies: they only drew their unity from repression. In a reality reduced to the quantifiable, thoroughly dominated by the principle of identity and without the slightest dissent to threaten its balance, the old economico-philosophical babble would be useless.

These fantasies sometimes find an em-

bryo of practical realization unsurpassed in what they reveal. A hospital, in Richmond, Virginia, perfected an “Isle of Life: For the Critically Burned.” The thing itself is a gigantic plastic bubble kept completely free of germs. The burned, after being de-contaminated, are placed inside this bubble in a *pre-sterilized atmosphere* — “No claustrophobia: the isle of life is *transparent*.” Awaiting the nuclear conflict that will provide this philanthropic organization with the customers it deserves, this society builds the images of the conditions it imposes: survival in controlled isolation.

Though the commodity-spectacle tends to install this flat and disincarnated positivity, it suckles negation, and like all historical reality produces itself the seeds of its own destruction. An old socio-economic commonplace, the development of the mass consumer goods industry produces and overproduces overproduction. Some sociologists even get to understand that with overproduction of goods, the objective differences between objects disappear. The only differentiation that can be introduced is merely subjective. But it is beyond a sociologist to discover the latent tendencies to self-destruction that such a process gestates. With the disappearance of use-value, the general identity between things passes from experienced fancy to fantasmagorical realization. Yet, the use-value is the kernel of reality which is indispensable to the breeding and survival of exchange value. The commodity itself suppresses its own conditions. When the system can dispense with reality, it is because reality can do without the system. Modern society is already so big [pregnant] with a revolution that it parodies its own destruction. Gadgets work for the doomsday of the commodity. The latest gadgets are nothing-gadgets: the purposeless machine, the self-destructive machine, the phony dollar to be burned in the fireplace.

But the commodity is also producing its own gravediggers who would not know how to limit themselves to the spectacle of its destruction since their objective is the destruction of the spectacle. We can’t refute the conditions of existence, we can only liberate ourselves from them.

Gestures appear in outline at all levels of practical contest, ready to transform themselves into revolutionary acts. But in the absence of a revolutionary movement, these practical contests remain at the individual level. Theft in department stores, labeled “unknown proceedings” by the psycho-sociologists of the owners, is of a qualitatively different essence. In the spectacle of abundance, the so-called consumer goods cease being objects for pleasure to become *objects for contemplation*, more and more radically foreign to those whose needs they are supposed to satisfy. Theft at that point seems to be the only mode of appropriation for pleasure, contrary to the “known proceedings” that appear for contemplative use, which is a way of being possessed by things without getting pleasure from them.

Some sociologists in their police-method investigations have announced as a discovery the relationship that exists between gangs of Hell’s Angels and archaic societies. Yet it is only simply and obviously the real relationship between a society which is within the commodity and gangs that are beyond it. The voluntary destruction of commodities, breaking of shop-windows, recalls the sumptuous destructions of pre-capitalist societies (with the restriction that the extent — the revolutionary reach — of such gestures is limited in a society where there is overproduction). Some Hell’s Angels avoid this ambiguity by stealing commodities in order to give them away. They reproduce on a higher level the practice of giving that dominated archaic societies but which exchange — because it was a

formalization of social relationships on the basis of a low level of productive forces — came to ruin. They — the Angels — in this way find a pattern of behavior even better *adapted* to a society that defines itself as a society of plenty (by beginning practically to go beyond).

The most spontaneous gestures of past insurrections, those called blind by the antennae of power, were finally the most revolutionarily lucid. To cite only one example from the recent past, the insurgents of L.A. directly attacked the spectacular exchange value serving as decor to their bondage: they stormed the heavens the spectacle. As they destroyed the shop-windows and burned down supermarkets, they sketched out on the spot a restitution of use-value: a black carrying a stolen refrigerator in a wheelbarrow, opens it and takes out steaks and bottles of whiskey.

If it is true that until now revolutions have generally lost their time donning the rags of ancient celebrations, the enemy has always known how to remind the revolutions of the gestures that should have been accomplished long before. What has been taken for gestures of despair only expressed the despair of not having accomplished them sooner. Future revolutions will rediscover these gestures immediately and perform them without delay. As destruction of the commodity spectacle, the gestures carry the hope of a free construction of life. It will be time then to claim as man’s own all treasures stolen for the benefit of the heaven of the spectacle, to return them toward real life. We will be called the destroyers of the commodity world, we will only be the builders of ourselves.

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