

The Labour Debate

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As my contribution to the labour debate, I would like to disagree with the basic positions put forward by John Holloway in his opening contribution, and with the interpretation of Marx on which he bases those positions. The focus of my remarks will be John's interpretation and critique of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

First, I would like to stress that I agree absolutely with John that we must start from a view of labour as an active subject of the reproduction of capitalist social relations and so as the actual or potential agent of the transformation of those social relations and even of the transformation of the form of society itself or, in simpler terms, that capitalism is based on class conflict.¹ I also agree that any democratic socialist politics that does not take the actually existing subjectivity of the working class as its starting point is bound to be self-defeating. So I agree with John's rejection of a view of the working class as a social grouping which is constituted as the passive object of capitalist exploitation, ignorant of its true interests, lacking a consciousness of its historical role, perhaps even happily integrated into capitalist society.

John's point in drawing this distinction is to develop an argument about the role of the intellectual in late capitalist society, and this is where I disagree most fundamentally with him. John argues that 'we [intellectuals] occupy no privileged position above the throng, but simply have a peculiar way of articulating our participation in the conflict in which all participate'. John rejects the attribution of any special privileges to the intellectual, because he bases his rejection of capitalism not on a critique of capitalist exploitation but on a romantic aspiration to reclaim creativity from capitalist labour. From this perspective the intellectual is just a worker like any other, robbed of his or her creativity in just the same way as is an agricultural worker or an assembly line worker. John refuses the privileges of an intellectual, but at the same time he abdicates the responsibilities of the intellectual.

The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof

John starts by stressing the pivotal role of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, but then he disagrees quite fundamentally with what Marx actually wrote. Before we look at John's criticism of Marx, let us review Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

One component of Marx's youthful theory of alienated labour was a romantic critique of commodity production on the grounds of the dehumanising impact of the division of labour and the reduction of human creativity to labour-time. This was the basis on which Marx initially condemned Ricardo's political economy for its 'cynicism', and it is the element of Marx's work on which Marxist romanticism, including that of John, has focused.² Marx continued to see labour, in the sense of self-conscious productive

¹ I leave aside the fact that John does not want to start from labour, which 'is to enclose oneself from the beginning within a fetished world', but rather from creativity, 'which exists in-against-and-beyond labour'. But that is because John, like the young Marx, wants to reserve the term labour for alienated labour (Chris Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986).

² The implication of this critique is that the distinguishing feature of socialism would be the recovery of the creative power of human labour. But in his later works Marx sees capitalism as preparing the way

activity (John's creativity), as the practice that distinguishes humans from animals, but the starting point of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is not this idea of labour as creativity, but the concept of social labour, the idea that every society is based on some form of social production in which the members of society are not self-sufficient but in which they meet their needs by participating in co-operative labour.

The interdependence of the producers is articulated through the social relations within which the various members of the society produce and distribute their products, but the character of those social relations differs from one society to another. Social relations of production may be organised co-operatively or they may be organised hierarchically, they may be organised self-consciously or with little conscious co-ordination. In fact, Marx distinguished a number of typical modes of production based on typical forms of the social relations of production: two co-operative and self-conscious forms of organisation of production: primitive communism and communism, and four modes of production based on hierarchical production relations: the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist modes of production. In the analysis of a particular mode of production it is essential not only to identify the typical form of the social relations of production, but also to consider the form of the reproduction of the material forces and the social relations of production.

The organisation of social production involves the allocation of the labour of individual members of society to different activities, which is associated with the allocation of a part of the social product to the members of society to enable them to reproduce themselves. The social product may be allocated in accordance with need, or it may be allocated in accordance with social status, or it may be allocated in accordance with the contribution of the individual to production, or a part of it may be appropriated by non-producers. Allocation on the basis of the contribution of the individual to production might take the form of allocation on the basis of the amount of labour-time expended, but different kinds of labour might be judged to make qualitatively different contributions to social production and rewarded accordingly. The allocation might take place through a centralised system of distribution, it might take place on the basis of a decentralised system of reallocation or it might take place on the basis of custom and habit. There are lots of different and perfectly conceivable ways of organising a system of social production. But any society must have some means of allocating social labour and distributing the social product in such a way as to secure the reproduction of its individual members and of the material forces with which and the social relations within which they produce.

for socialism by developing the forces of production to an unprecedented degree, so as to minimise the amount of labour time necessary to meet the reproduction needs of the labourer. Under capitalism this minimisation of necessary labour is associated with the intensification of labour, the extension of the working day and the enforced idleness and pauperisation of a growing mass of the population. Under socialism it will be the means to shorten the working day and maximise the amount of time free from labour. 'The saving of labour time [is] equal to an increase of free time, i.e. time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back on the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power... It goes without saying, by the way, that direct labour time itself cannot remain in the abstract antithesis to free time in which it appears from the perspective of bourgeois economy. Labour cannot become play, as Fourier would like... Free time – which is both idle time and time for higher activity – has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the production process as this different subject' (*Grundrisse*, pp. 711-2).

In a hypothetical society of petty commodity producers, such as formed the starting point of Adam Smith's model, commodities are exchanged between producers as the products of labour on the principle of the equalisation of the returns to the expenditure of labour-time in different activities, the social presupposition of which is the mobility of labour between occupations and the indifference of the labourer to the content of the labour, presuppositions which, Marx argued, do not in fact pertain in a society of petty commodity producers since they are fully developed only in a mature capitalist society. Nevertheless, on these assumptions, commodities would tend to exchange in proportion to the labour-time expended on their production, so that the labour theory of value is appropriate to the conceptualisation of the quantitative regulation of the social relations of such a form of commodity production.

With the systematic exchange of the products of labour as commodities, one commodity assumes the form of universal equivalent, becoming the money commodity, so that the value of each particular commodity is expressed in its exchange ratio with the money commodity. The division of labour in such a society is then regulated by the exchange of commodities for money through which the expenditure of private labour by each producer is commensurated with the labour time socially necessary for the production of the commodity in question and social labour is allocated between the production of different commodities in appropriate proportions. The social character of the labour of the individual is then quantitatively expressed in the exchange ratio between the product of that labour and the money commodity. The participation of the individual in social labour is realised in the actual sale of the commodity for money, which provides the means with which the producer can buy the means of production and subsistence required for his or her social reproduction.

It was this analysis of the social form of commodity production that Marx summed up in his theory of commodity fetishism, according to which 'the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Capital, I, 73).

Fetishism and fetishisation

This is the passage with which John is in disagreement. John says that it appears that Marx 'is describing the social relations of capitalist society as they really are. It appears, in other words, that he is describing the fetishism of social relations as an established fact, as something that is'. I think that John is wrong, both in his characterisation of what Marx is saying and in his disagreement. It is very important to be clear exactly what Marx is saying, and exactly what is his theory of commodity fetishism before we start to apply it, criticise it, develop it or generalise it.

First, Marx is not describing the social relations of capitalist society at all in this passage. At this point in Marx's analysis capital and capitalism do not exist: it is the analysis of commodity production. As we shall see in a moment, the theory of commodity fetishism is applicable in a capitalist society to the relations between capitalist commodity producers, but the working class does not participate in capitalist society as a commodity producer, so that the theory of commodity fetishism has no immediate application to the capitalist class relation.

Second, Marx is not describing all social relations or social relations in general, or social relations in a commodity-producing society, but only ‘the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest’.

Third, the social relation to which Marx refers is not the relation between the individuals exchanging those things. In his analysis of the value form, Marx shows very clearly that the exchange relation is not the relation of barter between two private individual producers that Smith described, it is an asymmetrical relationship in which one commodity appears in the relative form of value, as the product of the private labour of the individual producer, but the other commodity stands in the equivalent form, not as the embodiment of the labour that went into its own production but as the representative of social labour. Thus the social relation which appears in the form of a relation between things is the relation ‘connecting the labour of one individual *with that of the rest*’, it is not the relation between two private individuals, but between one individual and society as a whole. The social character of the exchange relation is immanent even in the elementary form of exchange, but becomes obvious in the sale of commodities for money. That is to say, a particular commodity enters exchange as the product of the private labour of its producer, the money commodity as the embodiment or representative of social labour.

Fourth, it should be obvious by now why these relations cannot be direct social relations between individuals at work. On the one hand, there are no such direct relations because individual commodity producers work quite independently of one another. On the other hand, these are not relations between individuals, but a relation between the individual and society. Thus Marx is quite unambiguously, and quite correctly, saying exactly what he appears to be saying, that these relations *really are* ‘material relations between persons and social relations between things’, the form of which he has just expounded at considerable length. Thus, what Marx shows is that the relationship between one individual producer and all other producers *only exists in the form of* material relations between persons and social relations between things. This is their only reality, it is *only* through the purchase and sale of the products of labour as commodities that the concrete labours of individuals are brought into relation with one another as component parts of the labour of society. The fetishism of social relations becomes an established fact when one commodity is detached from all the others to serve as the universal equivalent.

Capital and the proletariat: the only really revolutionary class?

Commodity fetishism, as the theory has been developed so far, pertains to the relations between commodity producers. To understand the social relations of capitalist production we have to move beyond the analysis of the commodity form. ‘The real science of modern economy only begins when the theoretical analysis passes from the process of circulation to the process of production’ (CIII 447).

The presupposition of the capitalist mode of production is, on the one hand, the development of generalised commodity production, which makes available the means of production and subsistence as commodities, and, on the other hand, the separation of the labourer from the means of production and subsistence.

The separation of the labourer from the means of production and subsistence, which is the basis of the class relation between capital and the working class, is both the historical presupposition and the constantly repeated result of the reproduction of the

capitalist mode of production, as the capitalist emerges from the circuit of capital with a larger capital, while the worker emerges with nothing but his or her labour power. At the same time, the expanded reproduction of capital leads capital continuously to destroy the livelihoods of petty commodity and subsistence producers on a world scale. In seeking out new markets, capital first lures subsistence producers into the embrace of the market and then undermines their livelihoods as petty commodity producers by undercutting their prices. Where land and natural resources have not come under capitalist control, they still use the traditional means of enticement, force and fraud to dispossess the direct producers, so that, as Werner Bonefeld forcefully reminds us in his paper, the violence of capital lies not only in its origins, but is repeated in various forms at every stage of its expanded reproduction.

The productive forces unleashed by capital are incomparable in scale with those commanded by petty and subsistence producers, so that even a small capital employing a small number of wage labourers can displace a vastly disproportionate number of petty producers. The same is true of the dispossession of backward by more advanced capitalists. This phenomenon was expressed by Marx in his 'absolute general law of capitalist accumulation', that the more rapid the growth of capital, the more rapid the growth of the relative surplus population and the pauperisation of a growing mass of the world's population. Thus, while capital increases the productive power of labour to an unprecedented degree and constitutes the mass of the world's population as potential labour power for capitalist exploitation, it actually employs only a proportion of those whose labour power it sets free. The intensification of labour and the relative sophistication of the means of production mean that only some of the dispossessed can meet the requirements of capitalist production: the young, the old, the infirm, the insubordinate, those with inadequate or inappropriate skills have little hope of selling their labour power to capital at any price. Others, such as those celebrated by John, may refuse to pay the price of subordination to capital and scratch a living by some other means. Nevertheless, all of the dispossessed are potential wage-labourers for capital, and in that sense are members of the working class whose existence presupposes and is presupposed by its opposition to capital.

The concrete forms in which that opposition is or is not translated into class conflict are, of course, dependent on the concrete forms of the relationships established between labour and capital in the course of the expanded reproduction of the capital relation. In this respect we can introduce an immediate distinction between those members of the working class who enter into a relationship with a particular capitalist by selling their labour power and those who do not. It is clear that, even if in the most abstract sense the two have a common interest as members of the working class, the concrete forms of their perception and the modalities of their opposition to capital, will differ.

Frustration with the limitations of the organised labour movement, which has always had its roots in the organisation of those relatively privileged members of the working class who are able to sell their labour power to capital, has frequently led socialists to look to relatively more marginalised groups and strata, particularly the unemployed but also peasants and petty commodity producers, young people, ethnic and national minorities, as the source and/or political base of a more radical opposition to capital. However, the repeated experience of attempts to harness such forces, including those of the 1960s and 1970s, has shown that such forms of opposition remain fragmented, isolated and ephemeral unless they are integrated into a broader labour movement, the

only secure base of which has proved to be the trade union organisation that develops out of the struggle over the terms and conditions of wage labour, which cannot by any means be reduced to organisation on the basis of the sectional interests of particular groups of wage labourers. This was the lesson that Marx drew from the defeats following the revolutions of 1848 and the lesson that many people drew from the defeats following the 'revolutions' of 1968. At the same time, the organised labour movement has also repeatedly learned through bitter experience the dangers of exclusivity so that since the 1980s the priority has been to broaden the base and advance the unity of organised labour on a national and international scale. Thus the situation today is very different on both sides from that of the 1960s and 1970s.

The limitations of the organised labour movement were explained in the 1960s and 1970s in terms of various theories of false consciousness, according to which the organised working class failed to understand its truly revolutionary interests either because of its relatively privileged position, or because of its absorption by bourgeois ideology on the basis of the mystification of the wage form. This could lead socialists to the quasi-Leninist position, that John condemns, according to which the task of the intellectual is to bring leadership and enlightenment to the organised working class, or it could lead to the position to which John seems to have returned of proclaiming the revolutionary role of marginal strata, although John rejects any 'structural' definition of such strata, the opposition being identified on the basis of its subjectivity: the force of non-identity, which can unite the unemployed, the peasant of Chiapas, the intellectual and even the trade unionist in a romantic rejection of capitalism. But all of this is based on the idea that the workers who are at the base of the organised labour movement are the victims of fetishism or at least, in John's ameliorated form, fetishisation. John does not reject the theory of false consciousness, what he rejects is the quasi-Leninist idea that people cannot overcome false consciousness by their own efforts, on the basis of a recovery of their subjectivity and their creativity. So let us return to the theory of fetishism.

The fetishism of capital: are workers victims of fetishism?

On the basis of the capitalist class relation, capitalists purchase labour power as a commodity. Thus the relation between capitalist and worker at this point in the circuit of capital assumes the form of the purchase and sale of a commodity. However, this is not a relationship in which 'the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear ... as ... material relations between persons and social relations between things'. The social relation between workers as potential wage labourers, and between wage labourers and capitalists, is not a relation between commodity producers, because labour power is not produced as a commodity. The labour of one individual is connected with that of the rest in a completely different form. There is no confrontation of the private labour of the individual with social labour in the form of money. The wage is a sum of money which is paid to the worker by the capitalist in exchange for the power of command over the labour power of the worker for a particular amount of time.³ Thus the money paid as a wage is not money in the form

³ Marx takes over from classical political economy the idea that labour power has a value that corresponds to the labour-time necessary to produce the means of subsistence required to reproduce the labourer, criticising political economy only for not distinguishing the labour power, command over which the worker sells to the capitalist, from the activity of labour. Marx is here not sufficiently radical

of the universal equivalent, but money as the means of purchase, on the one side as means of purchase of labour power, as a part of money capital, and on the other to provide the means of purchase of the worker's means of subsistence.

This does not mean that the wage relation is transparent. Marx discusses at some length the illusion of the 'wage form', which is the representation of the wage not as the payment for command over the worker's labour power but as payment for that labour itself, an illusion that led political economy into confusion because it led to labour apparently having two values, one corresponding to the wage and the other corresponding to the labour expended by the worker. This illusion Marx himself only dispelled for the first time in the *Grundrisse* by making the distinction between the concepts of labour and labour power. 'What economists therefore call value of labour, is in fact the value of labour-power, as it exists in the personality of the labourer, which is as different from its function, labour, as a machine is from the work it performs' (Capital I, p. 771). The idea that the wage represents the value of labour is absurd, since labour is itself the source of value, but such 'imaginary expressions, arise, however, from the relations of production themselves. They are categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations. That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy' (CI, p. 769). The appearance that is expressed in the wage form arises from the fact that the wage paid really does correspond to the amount of time that the worker is at the disposal of the employer, and the fact that the wage is normally only paid after the labour has been performed. The illusion is compounded by the use of piece-rate payment systems, where the wage is represented as a share in the product. Nevertheless, 'that which comes directly face to face with the possessor of money on the market, is in fact not labour, but the labourer. What the latter sells is his labour-power' (CI, p.769).

Although we are no longer dealing with the fetishism of commodity production, the fetishism of the commodity is a special case of a more general theory of fetishism, according to which the social qualities acquired by things are attributed to their physical characteristics – the 'fetishism peculiar to bourgeois Political Economy, the fetishism which metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things' (CII, p. 303). In the case of the fetishism of the commodity, it really is the case that social relations between people are constituted by relations between things. The fetishism consists in believing that this power is inherent in the things themselves, rather than being impressed on those things by the character of the social relations of production. The mystification of the wage form, however, is a pure mystification: the reality is that the capitalist pays the worker for the command of his or her labour time, the idea that this is a payment for the worker's labour is a pure mystification.

The wage is a social phenomenon, in that the wage only exists as the content of the social relation under which the labourer is employed by the capitalist as wage labour, which is a social relation specific to a particular mode of production, yet in the wage form the wage is attributed to the physical productivity of labour. Marx goes further

in his critique of political economy. Labour power is not produced as a commodity, so there is no reason why it should tend to sell for a wage corresponding to its value, as defined by Marx.

than this, and characterises the illusions of the wage form, like the fetishism of commodities, in terms of a contrast between the phenomenal form and the essential relation that has to be uncovered by science: 'For the rest, in respect to the phenomenal form, "value and price of labour," or "wages," as contrasted with the essential relation manifested therein, viz., the value and price of labour-power, the same difference holds that holds in respect to all phenomena and their hidden substratum. The former appear directly and spontaneously as current modes of thought; the latter must first be discovered by science. Classical Political Economy nearly touches the true relation of things, without, however, consciously formulating it. This it cannot, so long as it sticks in its bourgeois skin' (CI, p. 776).

But to what extent are we dealing here with a 'phenomenal form' and an 'essential relation' that is its 'hidden substratum'? The wage might well appear spontaneously to the capitalist as a payment for labour: this is how it is represented in his accounts, it is what he actually had to pay for the labour that he used, and it certainly serves his ideological purposes to represent the labour that he has used as being fully paid for. But is that how it appears to the worker? Marx did not seem to think so. In the imaginary dialogue between capitalist and worker in which the two sides debate their rights as commodity owners in relation to the length of the working day, the worker is very clear as to the true character of the wage relation. As Marx has the worker say to the capitalist, 'the commodity that I have sold to you differs from the crowd of other commodities, in that its use creates value, and a value greater than its own. That is why you bought it. That which on your side appears a spontaneous expansion of capital, is on mine extra expenditure of labour-power' (CI, pp. 336-7). The essential relation may be hidden from political economy and even from the capitalist, but it is by no means hidden from the worker.

This is not to say that the worker necessarily perceives the wage relation in its true colours. The worker may perfectly well be deceived, not least by the propaganda of his employer, into believing that he or she has participated in an equal exchange and has been fully remunerated for his or her labour, particularly if the wage relation is conceived not in relation to the production of surplus value under the domination of the capitalist, but in relation to the exchange of commodities between free and equal citizens. Thus 'this phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all the juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalistic mode of production, of all its illusions as to liberty, of all the apologetic shifts of the vulgar economists' (CI, p. 774).⁴

The illusion of the wage form is the illusion that the labourer has been paid in full for her contribution to production. This immediately implies that the remainder of the product must be due to something else. For the physiocrats it derived from the fertility of the soil, for Adam Smith from the enhanced productivity due to the greater division of labour, but for vulgar economy from Say to today it is due to capital, and particularly to the productivity of the means of production. This is an illusion that arises out of the social form of the capitalist labour process.

⁴ Note that in this passage the actual relation is not inherently invisible: it is the phenomenal form that makes it invisible.

When it comes to the labour process too, however, it is not clear whether things appear the same to the worker and to the capitalist. On the one hand, the worker knows full well that she is the active agent of production, that the productivity and profitability of the production process depends on the intensity and duration of her labour. Nor does the capitalist neglect to remind her of the fact, leading to the struggle over the length of the working day and over the intensity and conditions of labour that Marx chronicles at length in Volume One of *Capital*. From this perspective, there is no fetishism and no mystery: the theory of surplus value is not a metaphysical theory of a different, even an unobservable, order of reality, but no more than the systematic expression of the experience of the workers that the capitalist appropriates the full product of their labour and that the amount of surplus-value that is appropriated by the capitalist is determined by the extent to which he can intensify the labour and extend the working day of his employees. In that sense, the theory of surplus value as the difference between the length of the working day and the working time necessary to produce commodities equivalent in value to the wage is the theory of value appropriate to social production on the basis of capital.

On the other hand, Marx notes that in the capitalist form of production the powers of social labour appear to be the powers of capital. The increases of productivity achieved by the factory system are a result of the economies of scale, the greater division of labour and the application of science that is possible when a large number of workers are brought together to work co-operatively. However, co-operation on a large scale was not the result of the collective organisation of the workers, but of the purchase of their labour power by the capitalist, so that the powers of collective labour appear to be the power of capital: ‘Their union into one single productive body and the establishment of a connexion between their individual functions, are matters foreign and external to them, are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings and keeps them together. Hence the connexion existing between their various labours appears to them, ideally, in the shape of a preconceived plan of the capitalist, and practically in the shape of the authority of the same capitalist, in the shape of the powerful will of another, who subjects their activity to his aims... On entering that process, they become incorporated with capital. As co-operators, as members of a working organism, they are but special modes of existence of capital. Hence, the productive power developed by the labourer when working in co-operation, is the productive power of capital. This power is developed gratuitously, whenever the workmen are placed under given conditions, and it is capital that places them under such conditions. Because this power costs capital nothing, and because, on the other hand, 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’ (CI, pp. 476, 478). In exactly the same way, the increase in the productivity of labour that is made possible by the application of machinery appears to be a product of the power of capital.

It is this increase in the productivity of labour that is apparently made possible only by the power of capital that serves as the basis for the fetishism of capital, according to which profit is not seen as the product of the surplus labour time of the assembled wage labourers, but corresponds in some way to the productivity of capital. This illusion is compounded by the fact that, when it comes to the realisation of the surplus value produced, commodities are sold not as the products of labour, but as the products of capital, and so not on the basis of the equalisation of labour-time but on

the basis of the equalisation of the rate of profit. This transformation of values into prices of production means that wages and profits appear to comprise independent parts of the selling price of the commodity: wages appear as the payment for the labour employed, alongside all the other costs of production, profit appears as a percentage return on the capital laid out.

The ultimately fetishistic form of capital is that of money capital, in which no social relations at all intervene in the expansion of capital: 'The relations of capital assume their most externalised and most fetish-like form in interest-bearing capital. We have here M—M', money creating more money, self-expanding value, without the process that effectuates these two extremes. In merchant's capital, M—C—M', there is at least the general form of the capitalistic movement, although it confines itself solely to the sphere of circulation, so that profit appears merely as profit derived from alienation; but it is at least seen to be the product of a social *relation*, not the product of a mere *thing*' (CIII, p. 520).

The fetishistic illusion is summed up in the 'trinity formula', discussed at the end of Volume Three of *Capital*. The illusion of the trinity formula is based on the identification of the three physical factors of production, labour, land and means of production, whose co-operation is necessary to produce in any society, as the sources of the three revenues, wages, rent and profit. The illusion of the trinity formula corresponds to the practical consciousness of the capitalist, but it does not arise spontaneously. It had to be elaborated theoretically by political economy, its most developed form being that expressed in John Stuart Mill's radical separation of production relations, which are the co-operative relations between the factors of production, and distribution relations, which are the historically specific forms within which the shares in the product attributed to the particular factors of production accrue to the owners of those factors.

This illusion corresponds to the practical apprehension of the capitalist, and to the transformed forms in which capitalist social relations appear as a result of the realisation of commodities as the products of capital on the basis of the equalisation of the rate of profit. From this point of view it really is the case that wages correspond to the quantity of labour that the capitalist has employed, rent is related to the amount and fertility of the land, and the realised profit is assessed in relation to the normal rate of return on capital. It is also clearly an illusion that corresponds to the capitalist's ideological interests.

Marx criticises this account as irrational, in deriving social phenomena characteristic only of one particular form of society from universal, natural categories, and presents his own alternative theory based on his analysis of the social form of capitalist production, within which alone social production is organised on the basis of capital and the social product is distributed in the form of wages, rent and profit. Within the capitalist social form of production, the worker sells his or her labour power to the capitalist, who sets that labour power to work with his means of production and then appropriates the entire product, the increased value that has resulted from the extension of the working day beyond the time socially necessary to produce commodities equivalent to the labourers' means of subsistence constituting the surplus value, which is then distributed among the capitalist class in the form of profit, rent and interest.

As we have seen, Marx presents his account as the essential relation, that he contrasts with the phenomenal form in which the essential relation is misrepresented in the consciousness of the capitalist. But once again we must ask, what about the workers? Does capital present itself to the workers' spontaneous consciousness in the same way as to that of the capitalist? Or does it present itself to the workers in a form corresponding to the essential relation?

We can turn this question the other way around and ask, how does Marx discover the essential relation? How does he know what is the social form of capitalist production? As soon as we pose the question this way around the answer is obvious. Marx discovers the essential relation by viewing the capitalist mode of production from the perspective of the experience of the worker. The worker knows full well that she is selling her labour power and knows full well that the more the capitalist can intensify labour and extend the working day, the greater will be his profit. This is not by any means to say that the capitalist mode of production is transparent to the worker, it is only to say that the characterisation of the social form of capitalist production, on the basis of which Marx was able to build his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, is based on and validated by the experience of workers, selling their labour power to capitalists and labouring, however reluctantly and recalcitrantly, under the direction of the capitalist.

We have seen that there are two dimensions to Marx's theory of fetishism. On the one hand, Marx's theory of the social form of commodity production in which social relations between people in the 'social division of labour' only exist in the form of relations between things, so that social production is dominated by forces beyond human control. On the other hand, the more general theory of fetishism, according to which social relations are misperceived and social powers attributed to things. The first aspect is a theory of social forms, the second is a theory about the perception of social forms. The problem with John's account is that he reduces the theory of social forms to a theory of perception.

The theory of commodity fetishism is a theory of the form of existence of the social relations of the capitalist production of commodities. The fact that social relations have this form is quite independent of our apprehension of those relations: 'The recent scientific discovery, that the products of labour, so far as they are values, are but material expressions of the human labour spent in their production, marks, indeed, an epoch in the history of the development of the human race, but, by no means, dissipates the mist through which the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves. The fact, that in the particular form of production with which we are dealing, viz., the production of commodities, the specific social character of private labour carried on independently, consists in the equality of every kind of that labour, by virtue of its being human labour, which character, therefore, assumes in the product the form of value – this fact appears to the producers, notwithstanding the discovery above referred to, to be just as real and final, as the fact, that, after the discovery by science of the component gases of air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered...The determination of the magnitude of value by labour-time is therefore a secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations in the relative values of commodities. Its discovery, while removing all appearance of mere accidentality from the determination of the magnitude of the values of products, yet in

no way alters the mode in which that determination takes place' (Capital, I, pp. 107-9).⁵

While it is true that we can fight against the fetishisation of social relations, in the sense of their perception as natural, eternal and unchangeable, it is not true that merely to perceive the social forms of capitalist commodity production differently will change them in any way, which is perhaps why John is led by his critique to rejection rather than transformation. But the point is not merely to understand the world, the point is to change it, and what Marx's theory of commodity fetishism showed was that the only force that could change the world was the self-organisation of the direct producers who would abolish the production of commodities based on capital and bring social production under conscious social control. We do not have to go so far as Bernstein, who argued that the movement is everything, the ultimate aim is nothing, but without the movement the ultimate aim is just so much hot air.

Elitism and spontaneity

Marx's critique of political economy is a critique of a theory elaborated on the basis of the practical consciousness of the capitalist from the perspective of a theory elaborated on the basis of the everyday experience of the working class. But although these theories are elaborated on the basis of two distinct class perspectives, the critique of political economy cannot be reduced to a class struggle in theory. The elaboration of the two theories is not simply a matter of the articulation of spontaneous consciousness: both required a great deal of intellectual labour to develop them to the highest possible degree of consistency and coherence. Marx does not criticise political economy from the basis of a particular class position, but on the ground of reason and reality: the theories of political economy are irrational, their concepts do not correspond to anything in reality. On any normally accepted canons of scientific practice, Marx is right and political economy is wrong.

John is concerned that if we adopt Marx's theory of fetishism then a distinction is immediately established between the consciousness of the agents of commodity production and the intellectuals who 'are able to penetrate the fetishised appearances and understand their reified relations as the historically specific form or mode of existence of relations between people'. This indeed is precisely both the purpose and the import of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, although he applied his critique not so much to the spontaneous consciousness of the agents of commodity production as to the theoretical elaboration of such a spontaneous consciousness in the form of vulgar economy and political economy. It is hardly necessary to quote the famous footnote to Chapter One of Volume One of Capital: 'It is one of the chief failings of classical economy that it has never succeeded, by means of its analysis of

⁵ It is not clear what are the conditions under which it is possible to penetrate the illusions of the commodity form. At one point Marx notes that commodity production makes its appearance at an early date in history, though not in the same predominating and characteristic manner as now-a-days, so that 'its Fetish character is comparatively easy to be seen through' (CI, pp. 119-120). On the other hand, however, Marx also notes that 'it requires a fully developed production of commodities before, from accumulated experience alone, the scientific conviction springs up, that all the different kinds of private labour, which are carried on independently of each other, and yet as spontaneously developed branches of the social division of labour, are continually being reduced to the quantitative proportions in which society requires them' (CI, p. 108).

commodities, and, in particular, of their value, in discovering that form under which value becomes exchange-value ...' (p. 116). This failure of classical political economy was not a wilful deception: it was because the form of value is not immediately obvious, because its discovery requires a considerable amount of intellectual labour, and because an idealist conception of value as being a universal property of the products of labour is a barrier to identifying the historically specific character of the commodity form. Marx himself had spent over twenty years, on and off, breaking his head over it before the version that was published in *Capital*. So his claim to have a better understanding of the value form than did political economy, to say nothing of the vulgar apologists for capitalism, has some foundation.

The whole point and the whole purpose of Marx's critique of political economy was to penetrate the misconceptions, the false consciousness even, that are fostered by the illusions that can arise on the basis of immediate reflection on the forms of appearance of commodity relations. 'If, as the reader will have realised to his great dismay, the analysis of the actual intrinsic relations of the capitalist process of production is a very complicated matter and very extensive; if it is a work of science to resolve the visible, merely external movement into the true intrinsic movement, it is self-evident that conceptions which arise about the laws of production in the minds of agents of capitalist production and circulation will diverge drastically from these real laws and will merely be the conscious expression of the visible movements. The conceptions of the merchant, stockbroker, and banker, are necessarily quite distorted. Those of the manufacturers are vitiated by the acts of circulation to which their capital is subject, and by the levelling of the general rate of profit' (CIII p. 414).

'Vulgar economy actually does no more than interpret, systematise and defend in doctrinaire fashion the conceptions of the agents of bourgeois production who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations. It should not astonish us, then, that vulgar economy feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations in which these *prima facie* absurd and perfect contradictions appear and that these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it, although they are understandable to the popular mind. But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (CIII 1094–5).

It is not the fact that 'we' are intellectuals that gives us some privileged understanding of the social relations of a capitalist commodity producing society. After all, the vulgarisers, the systematisers of the deceptive appearances of capitalist social relations, the dissemblers of contradiction and inconsistency, the apologists of the capitalist system, are intellectuals: the social position and social role of the 'intellectual' in this sense, as opposed to the scientist, is precisely to articulate the bourgeoisie's own world view. It is the fact that we, whatever our social origin or social function, adopt a scientific view of the world and engage in arduous and rigorous intellectual work that enables us to develop a more adequate understanding.

Marx was not necessarily distinguished from the best of political economists in his dedication to intellectual work or his commitment to the values and procedures of science. I have argued that Marx was able to develop a more adequate theory of the capitalist mode of production because he took as his starting point the experience of the working class. This is why Marx's work was able to speak to the experience of the working class, why Marxism, in one form or another, became the theory of the

international working class movement, why workers could read and understand and apply the analysis of *Capital*, while bourgeois intellectuals could barely get beyond the first page.

Workers do not need intellectuals to come and tell them where their interests lie. Workers have to combat capitalist exploitation and capitalist domination every day. But while the immediate object of the struggle of those in employment is the employer, the social form of commodity production means that it is not immediately apparent to workers who or what is their ultimate enemy and how they can most effectively channel their opposition to capital, and even more is this the case for those who do not have a job and so stand, at least temporarily, outside the capitalist system. Intellectuals have the training and the resources that enable them to penetrate the mysteries of the fetishism of the commodity, to produce knowledge of the workings of the capitalist system and so to inform the practice and programmes of the labour movement, whether this be in developing spontaneous local struggles or in confronting capital with a working class alternative on a global scale. If we happen to have well-paid jobs as intellectuals, then surely we have not only the ability but also the responsibility to put our skills and resources at the disposal of those who do not have such privileges, as Marx and Engels did when a group of German workers they met in a Brussels pub asked them to draft a *Communist Manifesto*, or when the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party asked them to comment on its party programmes. But why did these workers ask a couple of dishevelled intellectuals to write or amend their party programmes? Because the workers knew perfectly well that they were being exploited, but because they also knew that they did not have a thorough understanding of how they were being exploited or what they could do about it. There was nothing elitist or undemocratic about this. Having asked Marx and Engels for their views, the workers were by no means obliged to take any notice of them.

The problem of labour today is not a problem of a lack of consciousness or the lack of a desire to change the world.⁶ The problem is how to change a world which is, to a greater degree than ever before, driven by anonymous forces, dominated by the movement of money as the alienated form through which alone 'the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear'. This is a problem that confronts the millions of people without work and without any hope of work; that confronts those driven to work for wages that do not even cover their subsistence in conditions that threaten their health and life; that confronts those who may be well-paid but whose work is increasingly insecure and subject to the ever-greater intensification of labour. It is a problem that is being posed within the labour movement which, for all its faults, is the only collective expression of the interests and aspirations of labour, in hundreds of different ways, at every level and in every part of the world. In this situation progressive intellectuals have a responsibility to supplement the intellectual resources of the labour movement, to help to broaden its understanding and its horizons, to analyse the movements of capital, to contribute to the critique of the modern forms of vulgar economy, to find and learn from new ways

⁶ While Marx was not much concerned with the problem of class consciousness, which he did not consider a determining force, it is not true, as Werner claims, that he never mentions it. For example, 'with the accumulation of capital, the class-struggle, and, therefore, the class-consciousness of the working-men, develop' *Capital* Vol 1 Chapter 25, p. 938.

of organising and new forms of struggle so that the labour movement can begin to reverse the setbacks and defeats of the last twenty years. It is only when the subordination of labour to the production and appropriation of surplus value has been abolished that the potential to minimise the burden of labour that has been created by the capitalist development of the forces of production can be realised. It is only when the labourers have recovered their free time from capital that they will be transformed into a different subject, free to discover the creative powers of their labour, which in all previous societies has been the privilege of a few, whose own freedom rested on the forcible appropriation of the products of the labour of others.