CHAPTER 1

Fetishism and Subjects: Between Reality and Mystification

At a different level of reality, Marxism seemed to me to proceed in the same way as geology and psycho-analysis ... All three showed that ... true reality is never the most obvious of realities, and that its nature is already apparent in the care which it takes to evade our detection.

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, A World on the Wane

The 'Enigma' of the Commodity

Throughout all of Marx's oeuvre he was attentive to the individual dimension, from his first texts up until Capital. His outlook on this question was based on a constitutive ambivalence in the capitalist mode of production: on the one hand, the individual is configured as a novum with respect to the previous productive forms, in which man was linked to his own community as if by an 'umbilical cord'; yet on the other hand, there now appeared the other 'face' of social power, materialised in money. As such, the development of the individual and his subsumption under capital represent two sides of the same coin. Moreover, the concept of individuality itself has a dual register. It not only represents the polemical reference point of Marx's discourse, but also connotes the perspective that he is himself articulating. After all, far from posing communism in organicist terms, throughout each phase of Marx's itinerary he understood it to mean individuals' full realisation – or, to use a terminology drawn from contemporary French philosophy, the full realisation of the 'singularities' as they 'act in common'. We see this from his delineation of 'individuals as individuals' in the German Ideology to the 'social individuals' to which he

1 Repeated long visits to the Berlin Staatsbibliothek were fundamental to the realisation of this book. I would also particularly like to thank – for their attentive reading and insightful discussion of this text – Michele Basso, Ferruccio Gambino, Cristina Marras, Fabio Raimondi and Maurizio Ricciardi.
refers in the *Grundrisse*.\(^2\) He further elaborated his conception of individuality in *Capital*, in continuity with his previous reflection but also by adding new elements. A study of fetishism – in its both economic and juridical manifestations – is of no little use for the purposes of understanding this. Such an analysis will bring to light a significant aspect of Marx's reasoning, namely the crucial importance of the dimension of opacity, based on the interlinking of reality and mystification.

A section of the very first chapter of *Capital* Volume I is devoted to the question of fetishism, ‘The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof’. In his *Afterword to the second German edition*, Marx emphasises that he had made important changes to the pages in question: ‘A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties ... The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value’.\(^3\) Its enigmatic character derives from the form of the commodity itself.

... A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a natural social relation [*gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften*] ... between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.\(^4\)

Before delving into a specific analysis of fetishism, it is worth examining the commodity, which plays a crucially important role within the logic of Marx's discourse. Indeed, *Capital* begins by representing the capitalist mode of production as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities’; and the single commodity constitutes the ‘elementary form’ of this mode of production.

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’

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2 See Basso 2001, 2008a/2012.
3 *MECW*, Vol. 35, p. 82.