CHAPTER 5

The Role and Place of Commodity Fetishism in Marx’s Dialectical Exposition in *Capital*

Introduction

Ever since the publication of works such as Rubin’s *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*\(^1\) or Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*,\(^2\) the emphasis on Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism has been a hallmark of critical traditions of Marxism. In effect, according to those traditions, commodity fetishism is the cornerstone upon which the understanding of Marx’s mature works as a critique of political economy (as opposed to political economy or economics) depends.\(^3\) While there is no doubt that the fetishism of commodities plays a fundamental part in Marx’s critique of political economy, the question is, once we accept that premise, what are the precise meanings and implications of such a notion for the scientific comprehension of capitalist society as a whole, and, more concretely, for the proletarian political action through which the movement of capital realises its own annihilation? Here, the mere reference to the centrality of the historicity of bourgeois social forms and their fetishistic character does not suffice to grasp the critical and revolutionary nature of the critique of political economy. As I have been arguing throughout this book, the specific form of the dialectical method is fundamental in this respect. And *pace* Rubin,\(^4\) however central to the comprehension of Marx’s critique of political economy, the fetishism of commodities is *not* the basis of the determinations of the value form. On the contrary, I would like to argue that the former is a necessary development of the latter.\(^5\) This is far from being a minor point and is actually crucial for a proper comprehension of the nature of commodity fetishism and, therefore, for the ideal reproduction of the determinations of the most general concrete forms of objectivity and subjectivity of capitalist society.

---

1  Rubin 1972.
2  Lukács 1971.
4  Rubin 1972, p. 5.
The Immediate Object of Exposition of the Section on Commodity Fetishism and Its Systematic Place and Significance

In order to clarify the issue, let me go straight to the point and pose the fundamental question which underlies the proper comprehension of the systematic place and significance of the section on commodity fetishism in the structure of Marx’s presentation, namely, from the point of view of the dialectical method, what is the immediate object of the exposition in that section? As Iñigo Carrera points out, those pages fundamentally develop the determinations of the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer. Or, better stated, they unfold the determinations of the alienated consciousness as such, which, therefore, becomes explicitly expounded as an alienated consciousness. This is because, in reality, the whole of Chapter 1 (and, actually, the whole of Capital) has as its object the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer. However, the text starts out not with the alienated consciousness in and for itself, but with its most general objectified form of existence, namely, the commodity. Although the commodity will prove to be the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer, it is not yet known to be such at the beginning of the dialectical presentation. The commodity, not its producer, is thus the immediate subject of the determinations unfolded in the first three sections of Chapter 1.

Conversely, in the section on commodity fetishism, Marx turns his attention to the reasons why the products of private labour appear, to the producers themselves, as bearers of those reified powers whose autonomous self-movement he ideally reproduced through the expression of value contained in the exchange relation. Having discovered behind the power of exchangeability of commodities the historically specific form in which capitalist society resolves the social organisation of the organic unity of human life, the exposition needs to explain why the producers, the actual subjects whose material reproduction is at stake, must represent that process in their consciousness in such a mystical and fetishistic form. The transition is, then, from the formal subject of the value determinations, i.e. the commodity, to the material subject, i.e. the human individual.

In this respect, it could be said that the section on commodity fetishism opens a kind of new presentational (sub)node, which, in turn, will prove to be a necessary mediation for the determinations to be unfolded in Chapter 2 on the process of exchange. This is the case insofar as the section on com-

---