Mike Wayne

**Fetishism and Ideology: A Reply to Dimoulis and Milios**

Dimitri Dimoulis’s and John Milios’s essay on the significance of the concept of commodity fetishism within Marxist theory opens up the opportunity to return to some key questions around the concept of ideology, which has largely died an unnatural death within the social sciences and cultural theory. In particular, it raises questions around the relationship between ideology and the mode of production, consciousness and practice, the determinate and reciprocal relations between mode of production and the superstructure, and the epistemological foundations for knowing an object that systematically presents itself to the subject as it really is, but as it ‘really is’, is in fact partial, misleading and spontaneously (but not seamlessly) ideological. While their essay is to be welcomed as an invitation to further debate, it is, I think, rather problematic and in need of a rejoinder. The theoretical source for much

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1 Dimoulis and Milios 2004.
2 ‘...there is a kind of dissembling or duplicity built into the very economic structures of capitalism, such that it cannot help presenting itself to consciousness in ways askew to what it actually is. Mystification, so to speak, is an “objective” fact, embedded in the very character of the system: there is an unavoidable structural contradiction between that system’s real contents, and the phenomenal forms in which those contents proffer themselves spontaneously to the mind’. Eagleton 1991, p. 86.
of what is problematic in their essay is easily identifiable in terms of a name: Louis Althusser. There are no doubt many Althussers but it is a very orthodox one which Dimoulis and Milios recycle in their essay, in largely unmodified form, and as if all the critiques of Althusserian Marxism undertaken in the wake of its decline – not all of them wholly unsympathetic – had never taken place. The rigour with which they articulate their high-Althusserian critique of fetishism does, however, have the merit of starkly posing key questions which remain outstanding despite the break-up of the Althusserian paradigm all those years ago. Two questions are particularly apposite here: a) is there a general form of ideology (in capitalism)? b) If there is, how do we theorise it? Althusser’s answer to the first question was, correctly, yes. Without such a proposition, we cannot think the unity of ideology across a socially differentiated field occupied by multiple ‘players’. However, his answer to the second question, which so influences Dimoulis and Milios’s essay, was fundamentally flawed. The makings of an alternative answer can be derived from Marx’s theory of fetishism which is a critique of the modes of consciousness tacit in our social relations, as they are determined by the value-form. Analysis of the value-form – the forms which value takes in production and circulation – provides an understanding of the general principles which capital seeks to impose throughout a differentiated social structure. A theory of ideology (and the subject) grounded in fetishism provides the makings of an understanding of the relations between mode of production and the superstructure, which avoids both the problems of expressive causality, which Althusser subjected to critique, and the problems which his own