

# BEYOND REIFICATION

## Reclaiming Marx's Concept of the Fetish Character of the Commodity

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*Abstract: György Lukács's influential interpretation of commodity fetishism as "reification" shapes many contemporary critiques of the apparently objective and impersonal form taken by capitalist social relations. Such critiques seek to debunk the false veil of objectivity that results from fetishism, revealing the real character of the social relations underneath. This line of criticism, however, often attributes totalising power to capitalism, which undermines its own critical standpoint. I argue that the solution to this dilemma lies in understanding the fetish not as an ideological veil that needs to be debunked, but instead as a novel form of social interdependence that is genuinely – not illusorily – impersonal. This impersonal form is generated by a diverse array of disparate social practices whose interaction yields this unanticipated and unintended result. Within this framework, the diversity of the underlying social practices offers a practical potential basis for constituting new forms of social interdependence that lack not only the semblance, but also the reality of capitalism's oppressive objectivity.*

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Introducing the concept of the fetish character of the commodity, Marx describes the phenomenon as one in which “the definite social relation between men themselves [...] assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”<sup>1</sup> The meaning of this passage is murky.<sup>2</sup> The language – in which social relations are described as assuming a “fantastic form” – is often interpreted as though Marx understands the fetish character as some sort of “ideology” in the sense of a distorted perception or false belief that causes what is “really” a social relation between people to appear as something that this relation is *not*: namely, a “relation between things.” In this interpretation, the “relation between things” would operate as a sort of veil covering over what is *really* the fundamental reality, which is a personal relation. On this understanding, critique would consist in stripping back the veil to uncover the real relation underneath.

In the text surrounding this quotation, however, Marx makes clear that he does *not* understand the fetish character of the commodity as a veil that *covers over* a real relation. Instead, he understands this character as expressive of a very unusual kind of social relation – one specific to capitalist societies – which has the peculiar attribute that it can be taken not to be social at all. He does this, first, by suggesting that the fetish character of the commodity is not, strictly speaking, a subjective belief or an intersubjective phenomenon. This point becomes clear when Marx sets up, but ultimately rejects, an analogy between commodity fetishism and religion.<sup>3</sup> Marx argues:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities *with the products of men's hands*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, England and Ringwood, Australia: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> In Knafo's words: “The passage on fetishism in Marx's *Capital* is one of the most debated amongst Marxists and their critics.” Samuel Knafo, “The Fetishizing Subject in Marx's *Capital*,” *Capital and Class* 26 (2002), no. 1, pp. 145–175, here 147. Dimoulis and Milios, by contrast, suggest that: “The concept of commodity fetishism is not hard to understand and there are no serious disagreements between Marxists as to its content.” Dimitri Dimoulis and John Milios, “Commodity fetishism vs. capital fetishism: Marxist interpretations vis-a-vis Marx's analyses in *Capital*,” *Historical Materialism* 12 (2004), no. 3, pp. 3–42, here 5. This may overstate the interpretive consensus, but Dimoulis and Milios provide a nice breakdown of major views of the passage's implications, which I will not replicate here. See also Christopher Arthur, “The Practical Truth of Abstract Labour,” in Riccardo Bellofiore, Guido Starosta, and Peter D. Thomas (eds.), *In Marx's Laboratory: Critical Interpretations of the Grundrisse* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 101–120.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent reading of the fetishism passage that emphasises the connection to religion, see Roland Boer, “Kapitalfetisch: ‘The religion of everyday life,’” *International Critical Thought* 1 (2011), no. 4, pp. 416–426.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 165, italics mine.

The analogy Marx wants to make is that both fetishism and religion posit the existence of intangible entities – entities that Marx regards as the products of human practice, but which the social actors in question treat as “autonomous figures.” Marx quickly qualifies, however, that the *way* that social actors posit intangible entities is not the same in these two cases. Marx suggests that religion involves social actors sharing a common, intersubjectively-meaningful, *belief* in the existence of intangible beings. Shared beliefs – products of the human brain – generate collective practices that, by inducing social actors to behave as though certain intangible entities exist, constitute these entities as a practical, social reality with which social actors must contend in the course of their everyday practice.

To generate the fetish character of the commodity, by contrast, Marx argues that this sort of belief is not required. Instead, social actors somehow *make* the intangible entities Marx describes in terms of commodity fetishism – and they do this “with the products of their hands.” What this distinction could mean is somewhat unclear at this point in the text. As the argument develops, however, it becomes clearer that Marx intends to draw a distinction between social phenomena that could either be understood purely in cultural terms or solely in terms of intersubjectively-meaningful social phenomena, and a different kind of social phenomenon, one that Marx suggests social actors can create unintentionally, prior to integrating it into meaningful intersubjective belief systems. This distinction becomes important to Marx’s claim that political economy only *retroactively discovers* certain social patterns that Marx regards as intrinsic to capitalist production, and is important to understanding why Marx’s concept of the fetish is distinct from many attempts to thematize *ideology*, which often understand ideology in terms of *false* consciousness or incorrect belief. For Marx, the fetish character of capitalist relations is not a veil of illusion to be penetrated but an important qualitative characteristic of a special kind of social phenomenon that helps to distinguish specifically capitalist relations from the kinds of social relations characteristic of other forms of social life. I return to this point further below, but first I want to focus on the passages in which Marx introduces this distinction.

Having suggested that the fetish character of the commodity should not be understood as a *belief*, Marx goes on to suggest that this character is also not *false*. He argues:

the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as *what they are*, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165–166, italics mine.

Here the “fantastic form of a relation between things” is the “definite social relation between men”: there is no illusion to be stripped away, no veil to pierce. Yet, if producers see their social relations “as what they are,” why is this passage framed so critically? Why call this a “fetish” character? How does Marx understand the standpoint from which he offers his criticism of how things “really are”?

In this paper, I want to explore a possible answer to these questions, one informed by a close reading of the textual strategy of the first volume of *Capital* that, in particular, draws attention to significant parallels between Marx’s work and Hegel’s.<sup>6</sup> I frame this reading in contrast to Lukács’s classic analysis of reification by comparing the two authors’ very different understandings of the standpoint and target of critique.<sup>7</sup> Through a close reading of key passages from Marx’s text, I draw attention to aspects of Marx’s argument that are often overlooked in discussions of the fetish character of the commodity – in particular, to the way in which Marx’s discussion *juxtaposes*, rather than *contrasts*, the categories of use-value and value when introducing the concept of the fetish character of the commodity.

I argue that, in contrast to Lukács, Marx does not understand the fetish character of the commodity solely in terms of the universalisation of a social relation constituted primarily or exclusively by practices of exchange. Instead, Marx points to a much more complex, overarching, genuinely impersonal social relation, built out of component social practices that – considered by themselves or as they could be situated within different sorts of relations – would not generate this fetish character. This approach makes it possible for Marx to treat the fetish character of the commodity as a (socially, practically) *real* – rather than imaginary or solely ideological – phenomenon, one that reflects the aggregate effects or emergent properties that arise when particular component social practices come to be suspended in a particular kind of overarching social relation.

In this way, Marx can hold out the possibility for an immanent critique of social relations that exhibit this fetish character; not, however, by declaring the fetish character to be ideological but by contrasting the negative consequences of such relations with alternative possibilities for collective life that are anchored in the *potentially disaggregable parts* out of which that overarching relation is built. In this way, Marx can offer the possibility for the practical abolition of the socially real – but transient and transformable – phenomenon of a social relation that, so long as it continues to be reproduced, will generate fetish properties.

I begin below with a brief reflection on key dimensions of Lukács’s analysis of reification. I argue that Lukács positions critique as a process of stripping away illusions in order to unveil an *underlying* set of social relations that have *falsely* taken on an ap-

<sup>6</sup> For convenience of expression, since this paper focuses on the first volume of *Capital*, I will hereafter just refer to “*Capital*” when I mean volume 1.

<sup>7</sup> György Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 83–222.

pearance of rationality and objectivity. This form of critique is consonant with political strategies that would aim to replace this false rationality and objectivity with something more truly objective and rational – an approach that can provide inadequate critical purchase on technocratic capitalist forms.

I argue that Marx's approach, by contrast, seeks to understand how a *genuinely* impersonal form of social relation comes to be generated unintentionally in collective practice. By analysing the genesis of this social phenomenon, Marx does *not* seek to unveil it as an illusion. Instead, Marx seeks to reveal the social practices through which this phenomenon has *become real* and to understand how it continues to be *reproduced* as a "fantastic form" of social reality. I argue that Marx attempts to grasp the phenomenon he calls the fetish character of the commodity as an unintended *emergent property* of the collective performance of a broad range of social practices that are directly oriented to other ends. This social relation, according to Marx, is not intersubjectively meaningful and therefore does not rely on social actors' shared belief in, or understanding of, the relation. Instead, it is an *impersonal* – but still social – relation, which has been built out of component social institutions and forms of social interaction that, looked at individually, do not *intrinsically* possess the properties that these components help to generate when they are suspended together within this specific relation. This approach enables Marx to open up the possibility for a critique of the overarching relation from the standpoint provided by that relation's own potentially disaggregable parts – parts that can now be treated as immanently-available materials for constructing alternative forms of collective life – as moments of overarching social conditions we have not chosen, but out of which we nevertheless can build a very different sort of collective history.

I have suggested that a close reading of the passages where Marx introduces the fetish character of the commodity suggests that Marx does not view the fetish character as a veil. In his influential interpretation of reification,<sup>8</sup> Lukács cites some of these same passages, yet he reads them through the lens of other elements of Marx's work – in particular, in light of passages from much later in *Capital* that thematise the development of machinery and large-scale production and that analyse structural tendencies toward bureaucratic management. This more eclectic approach to Marx's text enables Lukács to uncover what Lukács presents as "Weberian" elements in *Capital* – but in a way that obscures Marx's own analysis of such dimensions of capitalist production. This eclecticism allows Lukács to import into Marx his own argument that capitalism is characterised by parallel trends toward the expansion of formalistic, mathematical systems through philosophy, government, economics, and culture. Lukács understands these trends as expressions of a socially-general privileging of forms of thought that

<sup>8</sup> Lukács's influence is often tacit and indirect – as Grondin argues: "if Lukács does not seem to be at the center of philosophical debates today, it is because his presence is basically beneath the surface [...] it works especially throughout critical theory." Jean Grondin, "Reification from Lukács to Habermas," in Tom Rockmore (ed.), *Lukács Today* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1988), pp. 86–107, here 87.

abstract from qualitative specificity, in the same way that Lukács takes market exchange to abstract from the qualitative specificity of the use-values of goods.

Lukács's approach enables a creative interpretation of *Capital* oriented to the distinctive circumstances of the transition away from liberal capitalism. It also, however, leads Lukács to overlook some of the implications of the passages to which I have drawn attention above. As a consequence, Lukács starts from the position that the concept of the fetish character of the commodity is intended to pick out an *illusion*, which Lukács describes as:

a relation between people [that] takes on the *character of a thing* and thus acquires a "phantom objectivity," an autonomy that *seems* so strictly rational and all-embracing as to *conceal* every trace of its *fundamental nature*: the relation between people.<sup>9</sup>

In Lukács's version of the argument, then, there is a hierarchy of levels of social reality that includes a "fundamental nature" – a "relation between people" – that is more *foundational* than other dimensions of social experience, and which is also *hidden*.<sup>10</sup> Lukács suggests that the fetish character of the commodity describes a social relation that "takes on the character of a thing" – a relation that *appears* objective because it "seems so strictly rational and all-embracing." Already with this formulation, Lukács is setting up for an argument that capitalism only *appears* rational and all-encompassing. In *reality*, however, the argument implies that the system is *irrational* and *insufficiently* encompassing. Lukács is reaching for a standpoint of critique that is more fully rational and more genuinely comprehensive, and from which he can convict capitalism for its irrational and partial character. Lukács's critique aligns well, therefore, with a critique of liberal capitalism and of the irrationality of the market from the standpoint of the greater rationality and transparency that will purportedly be provided by centralised planning.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lukács, "Reification," p. 83, italics mine.

<sup>10</sup> Other criticisms of this aspect of Lukács's work can be found in Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); as well as Moishe Postone, "Lukács and the Dialectical Critique of Capitalism," in Robert Albritton and John Simoulidis (eds.), *New Dialectics and Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 78–100, here 92–94.

<sup>11</sup> A more complete analysis would address the "elective affinity" between Lukács's critique and the structural transformation associated with the transition to more organised forms of capitalism. I am conscious that, without such an analysis, the present critique can itself appear "idealist," as though the issue is a conceptual error or a mistake in reading Marx, rather than expressive of a specific configuration of social relations. The present piece, however, does not allow space to consider this question adequately, and so I focus on highlighting the different implications of Lukács's and Marx's analyses.

How would this approach differ from the reading of Marx I am proposing? If Marx does *not* see the fetish character of the commodity as an illusion, and critique does *not* take the form of penetrating this illusion to capture the reality underneath, what is the standpoint and the target of the critique? My suggestion is that Marx wants to describe the *form* of a historically distinctive social relation – a relation that, in his account, does not simply “appear” objective, but rather is genuinely mediated through social actors’ interactions with *objects*. A social relation, then, that *implicates*, as one of its moments, a particular relation of social actors *to things* – and that arises, moreover, as an unintended aggregate result of a diverse range of social practices oriented to various immediate social and material goals. As a consequence, the complex, aggregate social relation that confers the fetish character onto commodities (including proletarian workers, who are treated as commodities in human form) has a *socially impersonal* character that escapes the boundaries of the intersubjective frameworks through which social actors mediate other sorts of social interactions. The critical edge of Marx’s analysis does not derive, therefore, from any sort of declaration that this impersonal social relation does not exist, or is not “truly” impersonal. Instead, it derives from the demonstration of how such a peculiar and counter-intuitive sort of social relation – one that possesses qualitative characteristics more normally associated with our interactions with non-social reality – comes to be unintentionally generated in collective practice.

Within this framework, critique does not take the form of debunking its object. Instead, critique entails the demonstration of how its object is produced – the demonstration of what sorts of social conditions or practices its object presupposes. It is in this spirit that Marx acknowledges the (bounded, socially situated) validity of political economy, saying:

The categories of bourgeois economy [...] are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production [...].<sup>12</sup>

This acknowledgement, however, entrains a critique. Marx intends to convict political economy of not grasping the conditions or presuppositions of its own categories – of not grasping the limits of its own analysis. As *Capital* unfolds, Marx will systematically explore those limits in order to demonstrate the ways in which the reproduction of capital – the practical process that renders the categories of bourgeois economy “socially valid” – generates possibilities to overturn this transient social validity by effecting determinate practical transformations.

Marx’s approach, I suggest, points toward an analysis that will accept the (contingent, social) *reality* of the properties of the social relation it sets out to criticise, rather than treating the properties of this relation as illusions that need to be reduced back to

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 169.

something more “real.” Having started from the reality of this relation, however, Marx will then investigate the conflictual multiplicity of the constitutive moments that make up the relation – the diversity of social practices that are required to produce it. The result is an analysis of a heterogeneous assemblage of diverse parts that possess particular qualitative attributes as they exist *now*, as elements situated within a particular overarching social relation – but that can also be examined for the qualitative attributes these parts could *potentially* possess, if reassembled into different sorts of wholes. By carefully and systematically exploring the divergent implications of various moments of the reproduction of capital, and speculatively teasing apart how those moments exist within this process from how they might exist outside it, Marx can thus investigate diverse immanent potentials to develop the conflictual possibilities for novel forms of practice that are currently being incubated within the reproduction of capital.<sup>13</sup> Where Lukács’s work points toward a more rational, transparent, and comprehensive realisation of the potentials generated by capitalism, Marx’s work points toward the creative multiplication of diverse potentials that can be realised only by bursting through the constraints imposed by the reproduction of capital.

Returning to Lukács: I have suggested above that Lukács conceptualises the fetish character of the commodity differently from Marx – that Lukács takes the argument about the fetish to be a claim that critique must strip away an illusion to reveal an underlying reality, rather than a claim that critique must grasp how a distinctive relation comes to be produced in a *specific* form. At the same time, Lukács also operates with a different notion of the *commodity* than the one Marx puts into play.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, consonant with my interpretation of Marx’s text, Lukács senses that the category of the commodity is intended to pick out more than just an object or a thing and that Marx’s analysis of the commodity is intended to cast light on more than just the “economic” dimensions of capitalist society. On the other hand, Lukács understands this category in a particularly univocal, one dimensional manner, arguing:

at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure [...] [T]he problem of commodities

<sup>13</sup> Dimoulis and Melios draw attention to this speculative dimension of Marx’s approach when they discuss what they call Marx’s “comparative method” – a method that effects comparisons between capitalism and “other communities, real and imaginary.” Dimitri Dimoulis and John Milios, “Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism: Marxist Interpretations vis-à-vis Marx’s Analyses in *Capital*,” *Historical Materialism* 12 (2004), no. 3, pp. 3–42, here 5.

<sup>14</sup> Postone, in “Lukács and the Dialectical Critique,” also argues that Lukács’s understanding of the commodity differs from Marx’s, but focuses on a different distinction than the one I draw here, drawing attention to the tacitly transhistorical conception of labour that underlies Lukács’s notion of the use value dimension of the commodity.



must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Lukács conceptualises the commodity-relation as being effected through the social practices of market exchange, which Lukács understands in terms of the exchange of goods on the market. This understanding of the commodity-relation presents a dilemma, which to his credit Lukács explicitly recognises: market exchange long predates the phenomena Lukács wants to pick out with the term “commodity fetishism,” and so Lukács must account for how a very old social practice should suddenly come to generate qualitatively different effects in recent history which the social practice did not generate in the past.<sup>16</sup> To get around this dilemma, Lukács hits on the solution that the fetish character of the commodity arises only when the commodity relation – the exchange relation – has become *totalised*.<sup>17</sup> He argues:

<sup>15</sup> Lukács, “Reification,” p. 83. Note that, while I do not endorse the sweeping and tacitly reductive way in which Lukács attempts to treat the commodity form as an all-purpose concept for interpreting forms of subjectivity and objectivity in capitalism, I do agree with the basic impulse that Marx does intend to analyse both subjective and objective dimensions of the reproduction of capital with reference to a theory of practice. In this sense, my work aligns with an otherwise diverse collection of recent interpretations of Marx that have attempted to recover the argument Marx is making about the practical constitution of forms of subjectivity, as well as “objective” trends, that are reproduced along with the reproduction of capital. For other works that draw out different implications of Marx’s analysis of forms of subjectivity, with complex overlaps and divergences from my own, see for example Robert Albritton, *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Robert Albritton, “Superseding Lukács: A Contribution to the Theory of Subjectivity,” in Robert Albritton and John Simoulidis (eds.), *New Dialectics and Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 60–77; Christopher Arthur, “Hegel’s *Logic* and Marx’s *Capital*,” in Fred Moseley (ed.), *Marx’s Method in Capital* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993); Patrick Murray, *Marx’s Theory of Scientific Knowledge* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Bertell Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Lukács, “Reification,” p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Albritton suggests that Lukács has fallen into “an absolutely fundamental theoretical trap” by confusing the *theoretical* extrapolation that needs to be made in order to conceptualise reification as a *concept* with a *real phenomenon*: in reality, Albritton argues, the theoretical category of reification would never be realised in such a pure fashion, and so the task of critique and real social mobilisation is easier than Lukács’s theory suggests because capitalism never

What is at issue *here*, however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?<sup>18</sup>

Lukács suggests that the quantitative expansion of social practices that effect exchange relations, to the point where such relations become totalising, effects a *qualitative* shift that generates the historically specific phenomena associated with the fetish character of the commodity. Prior to this totalisation, according to Lukács, it was still possible to see through the veil and to recognise the personal character of the commodity-relation. As Lukács frames it:

*the personal nature of economic relations was still understood clearly on occasion at the start of capitalist development, but [...] as the process advanced and forms became more complex and less direct, it became increasingly difficult and rare to find anyone penetrating the veil of reification.*<sup>19</sup>

Lukács therefore interprets the commodity relation as a *personal* relation, deriving from the practice of market exchange, which begins to generate novel consequences as this relation expands beyond the boundaries it occupied in earlier forms of social life. Among these novel consequences is what Lukács calls *reification* – in which the personal character of the social relation comes to be *veiled* and social actors assume a contemplative stance toward a relation that has come to *appear* objective, impersonal, and beyond their control.

Once Lukács has posed the problem in this way, he sets critique the task of piercing the veil to reveal the personal character of the underlying relation. Since the personal relation is understood to relate to market exchange, critique and political contestation are here pointed to the overthrow of the market and the institutionalisation of state

lives up completely to its “ideal” and therefore always remains only *partially* reified. Albritton, “Superseding Lukács,” p. 62. Albritton is of course empirically correct, but I suspect there is an even more fundamental issue. The question isn’t just whether Lukács mistakes his “ideal type” theoretical categories for practical reality, but also whether those theoretical categories could ever provide a basis for grasping ways in which capitalism *immanently* generates possibilities for its own transformation. No doubt there are many possibilities for the critique of capitalism that lie in the gap between capitalism’s tendencies (which are theorisable) and elements of social experience that fall outside of what can be grasped theoretically. Marx claims, though, to be able to say something *even on a theoretical level* about capitalism as a system that somehow generates possibilities for its own transformation. Lukács’s categories provide no indication of how such an immanent critique could ever be constructed because he fundamentally relies on a critical standpoint that is expressly defined as lying outside the processes he theorises.

<sup>18</sup> Lukács, “Reification,” p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86, italics mine.

planning, within which the rationality and objectivity that were only illusory under capitalism could finally achieve social reality.

So how does this differ from what I am suggesting is Marx's own argument? I have already suggested above that Marx does not view the fetish character of the commodity as an illusion to be pierced, but rather as a phenomenon with practical "social validity" within a complex, aggregate social relation. The core theoretical problem for Marx is therefore not how to pierce an illusion, but how to understand the *practical generation* of a peculiar and oppressive social relation so that it becomes clearer what sorts of political actions would be required to dismantle it. I have further suggested that there is some sense in which Marx maintains that this complex relation, although social in the sense of originating in human practice, is somehow not intersubjectively meaningful at the point that it is constituted in social practice – that the appearance that capitalist society is characterised by "material relations between persons and social relations between things" is not an illusion to be penetrated but somehow expresses an important, historically-specific, insight into how things "really are" – and therefore casts an important light on a qualitatively distinctive feature of capitalist societies.

Does this mean that Marx understands the fetish character of the commodity as the result of social practices oriented primarily to market exchange, but sees the market as somehow more impersonal than Lukács does? Or is something *beyond* market exchange intended when Marx uses the category of the commodity to pick out a form of social relation? To address these questions, I need first to take a closer look at the opening paragraphs of the discussion of the fetish character of the commodity, situating these paragraphs in relation to the dramatic structure of the chapter as a whole. This discussion provides the foundation for understanding how Marx understands the "peculiar social character" of commodity-producing labour.

When Marx opens his discussion of the fetish character of the commodity, the first point he makes is that use value cannot account for this phenomenon. He argues:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis shows that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it [...] But as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it changes into a thing that transcends sensuousness.<sup>20</sup>

Lukács joins many other interpreters in concluding that Marx's point here is to distinguish use-value from exchange-value – and to argue that fetishism arises from the practice of tossing use-values into the cauldron of the market. A close look at the text, however, suggests that Marx is trying to argue something else entirely.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 163.

The opening sentences of the fetish character section, I suggest, should be read as a quick summation of the first three sections of the opening chapter of *Capital*.<sup>21</sup> To review these sections quickly: *Capital* opens by telling us how the wealth of capitalist societies “appears” – which initially is in the form of an “immense collection of commodities.” These commodities are immediately sensuous, directly perceptible “external objects” – things that are the objects of human contemplation. These sensuous objects are then described as possessing a dual nature, combining use-value, presented in this opening section as a transhistorical substance of wealth anchored in the objective material properties of things, and exchange-value, presented in this opening section as a contingent and an arbitrary and transient social form of wealth connected only contingently to the material substance of use-value.<sup>22</sup>

On a first reading, this opening discussion can seem to be merely definitional – a setting out of the terms and ground rules that will continue to inform the subsequent discussion. A couple of pages in, however, the text introduces a strange dramatic twist: a second voice intrudes, openly contradicting the claims of the first, “empiricist” voice. This second voice insists that the wealth of capitalist society in fact cannot be adequately understood with reference to the commodity’s directly perceptible, sensuous properties. Behind the sensible phenomena of use-value and exchange-value lies another, *supersensible* realm – the realm of the categories of value and “human labour in the abstract.” These supersensible categories cannot be directly perceived, but their existence can nevertheless be intuited by *reason* – a process the second, “transcendental” voice now proceeds to demonstrate through a series of deductions reminiscent of Descartes’s critique of sense perception<sup>23</sup> and which purport to derive the categories of value and abstract labour as something like transcendental conditions of possibility

<sup>21</sup> I am summarising very briefly here an analysis I have developed elsewhere in much greater detail. For the more fully developed version of this argument see Nicole Pepperell, *Disassembling Capital*. PhD Thesis (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2010) (online at <http://rtheory.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/disassembling-capital-n-pepperell.pdf> [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]); Nicole Pepperell, “Capitalism: Some Disassembly Required,” in Benjamin Noys (ed.), *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique and Contemporary Struggles* (London: Autonomedia/Minor Compositions, 2011), pp. 105–130; and Nicole Pepperell, “When Is It Safe to Go on Reading *Capital*?,” in Tom Bunyard (ed.), *The Devil’s Party: Marx, Theory and Philosophy* (London: Centre for Cultural Studies and Goldsmiths, 2009), pp. 11–21. Note that the reading I am offering here goes some way to explaining the strategic intention of sections of the first chapter that often seem confusing and mutually contradictory even to commentators who have very sophisticated interpretations of *Capital* and are very well aware of Marx’s complex relationship with Hegel. I suggest there is a level of humour and metacommentary in play in the structure and organisation of the first chapter of *Capital* that, perhaps because it seems out of place in such a work, tends to go overlooked.

<sup>22</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 125–126.

<sup>23</sup> Murray points to the way in which Marx is spoofing Descartes in this passage. Patrick Murray, “Enlightenment roots of Habermas’ critique of Marx,” *The Modern Schoolman* 57 (1979), no. 1, pp. 1–24.

for commodity exchange.<sup>24</sup> This “transcendental” voice then gives way, in its turn, to a “dialectical” voice, which presents a derivation of the money form in order to argue that the wealth of capitalist society cannot be adequately grasped in terms of *either* immediately sensible categories like use-value and exchange-value *or* supersensible essences like value and abstract labour, but rather must be grasped in terms of a *dynamic relation* that, through a series of dialectical “inversions,”<sup>25</sup> connects together antinomic moments into a contradictory whole.<sup>26</sup>

The order and content of this movement – from sense-perception, via a transcendental analysis of a supersensible world, through a confrontation with an inverted world, opening out on the “reflexive” analysis presented in the section on the fetish character of the commodity – is not unique to the opening chapter of *Capital*. This structure mirrors the dramatic movement of the early chapters of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, where Hegel follows consciousness in its quest to achieve certainty over its object.<sup>27</sup> In these

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 126–137.

<sup>25</sup> Marx’s adaptation of Hegel’s concept of an “inverted world” is central to Marx’s standpoint of critique in ways I cannot explore adequately in this context. Mike Wayne provides a nice analysis of how the concept of inversion is central to the discussion of commodity fetishism and to Marx’s conception of the historical specificity of capitalism, although Wayne focuses on exchange as the fetishistic act and emphasises the functionality of this practical abstraction for class domination – a move that may not fully credit Marx’s claim that social relations really are as they appear to be. Mike Wayne, “Fetishism and Ideology: A Reply to Dimoulis and Milios,” *Historical Materialism* 13 (2005), no. 3, pp. 193–218. See also the discussion of Marx’s inversion of Hegel in Djordje Popović, “Materialist Regressions and a Return to Idealism,” *Contradictions* 1 (2017), no. 2, pp. 63–91, which highlights – as I develop below – the ways in which Marx is attempting a demystification of Hegel along lines similar to Hegel’s own demystification of Kant and Fichte: by demonstrating how Hegel’s work presents a glorified transfiguration of social relations that actually exist. For demystification as an ongoing touchstone throughout Marx’s work, see Nicole Pepperell, “Impure Inheritances: Spectral Materiality in Derrida and Marx,” in Anna Glazova and Paul North (eds.), *Messianic Thought Outside Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 43–72.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, pp. 138–163. The third section of *Capital* is often understood as using Hegelian language, with commentators varying over whether the section draws from the *Logic*, or the *Phenomenology*; for a recent survey on connections between *Capital* and the *Logic*, see Fred Moseley and Tony Smith, *Marx’s Capital and Hegel’s Logic: A Reexamination* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); for another take on the importance of the *Phenomenology* to the issues discussed in this paper, see Eric-John Russell, “Living Distinctions over Atrophied Distinctions: Hegel as Critic of Reification,” *Contradictions* 1 (2017), no. 2, pp. 93–115. For present purposes, it does not matter whether Marx has Hegel’s *Phenomenology* or *Logic* more directly in mind when writing these sections of *Capital* – for a more thorough discussion of the textual issues, see Pepperell, *Disassembling Capital*, and Nicole Pepperell, “The Bond of Fragmentation: On Marx, Hegel and the social determination of the material world,” *Borderlands* 10 (2011), no. 1 (online at [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol10no1\\_2011/pepperell\\_bond.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol10no1_2011/pepperell_bond.htm) [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

<sup>27</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. James Black Baillie (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2003).

chapters, consciousness assumes a number of different shapes in successive, unstable attempts to achieve certainty of an object posited as existing outside consciousness. Consciousness first assumes a shape Hegel calls Perception, in which it positions its object as an external thing that can be grasped through sense-perception.<sup>28</sup> This shape proves unstable, propelling consciousness into a new shape Hegel names Understanding, in which consciousness attempts to achieve certainty by taking its object to be a world of supersensible universals that subside behind the flux of sensible phenomena.<sup>29</sup> This new shape in turn comes to be undermined through the confrontation with something Hegel calls the “inverted world,” which finally drives consciousness to realise, self-reflexively, that its object does not reside outside itself – that consciousness has been its own object all along.

The narrative structure of the opening chapter of *Capital* re-enacts this Hegelian drama – translating Hegel’s high drama into a burlesque parody that recounts, not consciousness’ quest for certainty of its object, but a debauched quest to grasp the wealth of capitalist society.<sup>30</sup> This parodic rendition of Hegel’s story line foreshadows the analytical trajectory Marx will follow over the next several chapters: that the wealth of capitalist society cannot be adequately grasped so long as we try to grasp this wealth as an object outside us – whether this object is understood in terms of a sensible property, supersensible entity, or dialectical relation. Instead, we must achieve the insight that *we* are the wealth we are attempting to grasp – that, in spite of appearances, the wealth of capitalist society is a subjective entity – living, fluid, human labour. Marx’s reflexive analysis will unfold this conclusion – not, however, in order to unveil the secret, intrinsic social centrality of human labour to the production of material wealth, but in order to criticise a runaway form of production that continues compulsively to reproduce an immaterial, *social* requirement for the expenditure of human labour-power, no matter how high the growth of productivity or material wealth. In the opening chapter of *Capital* this conclusion is hinted, but not yet rendered explicit, through the subtle textual parallel with Hegel’s work.

This parody of Hegel’s narrative provides the narrative frame that leads up to Marx’s discussion of the fetish character of the commodity. In the opening of the discussion of the fetish, Marx briefly recapitulates the main lines of the opening narrative of the chapter. Thus, when Marx states that “a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing,” he refers to the position articulated by the “empiricist” voice

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–96.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the substantive role of parody within Marx’s work, see Pepperell, “Capitalism: Some Disassembly Required”; Pepperell, *Disassembling Capital*; and Nicole Pepperell, “Debasing the Superstructure,” in Brad West (ed.), *Proceedings of the Australian Sociological Association 2014 Conference* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide: TASA, 2014) (online at [http://staging.tasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Pepperell\\_P2.pdf](http://staging.tasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Pepperell_P2.pdf) [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

that opens the chapter and that attempts to grasp wealth in terms of properties directly evident to sense-perception. Marx flags that the “transcendental” and “dialectical” voices have contested this empiricist perception by arguing that the chapter has shown that the commodity “is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”<sup>31</sup>

If readers had missed the strategic intention of the text when working through these earlier sections, Marx is telling them explicitly in his opening sentence here that he does not endorse the *form* in which these earlier arguments were presented: there is some sense in which the perspectives articulated in the earlier sections of the chapter express, and yet are not fully adequate to, the phenomenon they are seeking to grasp. Marx intends the reader to be “in on the joke” implicit in the order and structure of the opening sections. Believing his readers have been following this rather subtle bit of textual play, Marx now thinks he has adequately set up the puzzle whose solution is the concept of the fetish character of the commodity: the puzzle of why what Marx takes to be the self-evidently “deranged” categories outlined in the first three sections of this chapter should, in spite of their bizarreness, possess a social validity under capitalism – the puzzle of how these apparently mystical forms of thinking express something that is (socially, practically) real.

Readers know at this point in the text, if they did not know before, that the strategic intention of the earlier sections of this chapter is to illustrate *historically distinctive* forms of thought – forms of thought that express different aspects of the peculiar properties generated by a social relation that possesses a fetish character. In the section on the fetish character of the commodity, Marx then finally begins to discuss the sort of analysis that needs to be undertaken in order to account for *how* these forms of thought come to be socially valid. Marx begins by outlining what does *not* account for the fetish. This is the context in which Marx comments on use-value in the quotation above: use-value, he argues, if you could abstract it from the commodity relation, contains nothing that would generate the sorts of seemingly metaphysical properties Marx believes he has illustrated earlier in the chapter. The analysis of use-value, abstracted from the commodity-relation, therefore cannot explain why the empiricist, transcendental, and dialectical voices are socially valid.

Many commentators – including Lukács – assume that, by talking about use-value here, Marx is aiming to set up a contrast with exchange-value. It is therefore common to overlook the specific move that Marx makes next in the text. Immediately after arguing that the component elements of use-value do not account for the fetish character of the commodity, Marx insists – in an exact parallel to the preceding argument about use-value – that the component parts of *value* also do not account for the fetish character of the commodity-form. Marx writes:

<sup>31</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 163.

The mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value.  
*Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determinants of value.*<sup>32</sup>

So neither the determinants of use-value (abstracted from the commodity-relation) nor the determinants of value (abstracted from the commodity-relation) explain the fetish. What *does* explain the fetish then, for Marx? The answer is that the commodity-relation *itself* explains the fetish – the fetish arises, not from any of the component *parts* of the commodity-relation, but rather from the aggregate relation into which these component parts have come to be suspended. Marx expresses this point in the following way:

Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, Marx is trying to make an argument here, not about the contrast between use-value and exchange-value, but rather about the way in which a relation can be comprised of many parts and yet have distinctive qualitative characteristics that cannot be found in any of those parts when the parts are analysed independently of that relation.<sup>34</sup> In more contemporary terms, Marx is making an argument here about *emergence* – about the possibility for properties to arise within some overarching assemblage, without those properties reflecting the attributes that any of the component parts of that assemblage might manifest if these parts were examined in isolation or as they might exist if situated within some other sort of relation.

Within this context, the sorts of perspectives outlined in the opening sections of *Capital* simultaneously express aspects of the real properties of a social relation but also overlook the distinctive contribution that the relation makes to the qualitative characteristics expressed by its own moments. Marx opens up here the possibility for an immanent critique of forms of thought that confuse the attributes that parts possess *within* a particular relation for attributes that are *essential* or *intrinsic* to those parts – thereby naturalising the overarching relationship and missing opportunities to examine what alternative properties those parts might acquire if they could be reassembled into

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164, italics mine.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> My focus on the *relational* and *mutually-implicating* character of Marx's categories is consonant with much of the work undertaken by Ollman, whose work also highlights the way in which Marx breaks moments of the reproduction of capital down and examines them from multiple perspectives. Ollman, however, tends to conceptualise this relationality in terms of immanent relations, an approach that leads the analysis of relations in a slightly different direction to the one I suggest here. Ollman, *Alienation*; Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations*.



different social configurations.<sup>35</sup> The critical strategy of *Capital* involves breaking down the overarching process of the reproduction of capital into its constitutive moments and then exploring the characteristics those moments possess within the process of the reproduction of capital, precisely in order then to distinguish these characteristics from what might become possible if those moments could be extracted from this process. This approach allows Marx to offer a critique of the whole from the standpoint of the potentially disaggregable parts – a very different concept of the standpoint and the target of critique than that offered by Lukács.

Among many other implications, this approach provides Marx with a much more supple means of explaining the historical specificity of the fetish character of the commodity than Lukács has at his disposal. When Lukács equates the commodity relation with market exchange, and then notes that market exchange is historically quite old, he finds himself forced into the position that the quantitative expansion of market relations at some point leads to a qualitative shift – a move that then leaves him confronted with a totalising social relation whose power and pervasiveness make critique difficult to conceptualise.<sup>36</sup> Lukács's ultimately mystical evocation of the proletariat as the subject-object of history can be understood, in part, as a response necessitated by the power and coherence he has already ceded to capitalism by conceptualising it in such a totalising fashion.<sup>37</sup>

Marx has another option. He argues that many of the component moments that participate in the commodity-relation – markets, money, division of labour, and other factors – are certainly conditions or integral elements of the reproduction of capital. Many of these same moments, however, have also existed in other forms of social life without their existence generating the same fetish character. What has changed to generate the distinctive properties Marx associates with the fetish is the recent *recombination* of these

<sup>35</sup> Sayer makes a very similar point, arguing that fetishism involves a confusion whereby: “Properties which things acquire entirely as a consequence of their standing in a specific set of social relations are mistakenly seen as inhering in, and explained by, the material qualities of the objects themselves.” Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Arato and Breines formulate this dilemma succinctly: “Given the fact that Lukács was presenting himself a problem that was impossible to solve, it is not surprising that his solution ends in mythology.” Arato and Breines, *The Young Lukács*, p. 157. Russell’s “Living Distinctions” provides a useful discussion of how Hegel’s *Phenomenology* provides important theoretical resources for overcoming the impasses created by this dimension of Lukács’s approach: in a certain respect, this paper can be regarded as an exploration of how Marx is already putting those Hegelian resources into play, in ways Lukács and his successors have been unable to recognise.

<sup>37</sup> Lukács’s concept of the proletariat as the subject-object of history comes under frequent fire. For a sample of criticisms made of this concept, see Albritton, “Superseding Lukács,” pp. 72–75; Arato and Breines, *The Young Lukács*, pp. 139–141; Lee Congdon, *The Young Lukács* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 185–186; Postone, “Lukács,” pp. 87–89.

older moments into a new configuration that constitutes a historically unique form of social relation. In chapter six, where Marx analyses the market for labour-power, he finally makes explicit what he regards this “something new” to be,<sup>38</sup> arguing:

The historical conditions of [capital’s] existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It arises only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power. And this one historical pre-condition comprises a world’s history.<sup>39</sup>

This new factor combines with inherited elements into a novel relation, with unprecedented historical consequences. Interestingly, Lukács actually *reverses* Marx’s argument in his own discussion of free labour, arguing:

Only when the whole life of society is thus fragmented into the isolated acts of commodity exchange can the “free” worker come into being; at the same time, his fate becomes the typical fate of the whole society.<sup>40</sup>

For Lukács, therefore, the totalisation of the market eventually engulfs even labour itself; for Marx, by contrast, the generalization of a market in labour-power is one among several institutional innovations that operate together to transform markets into such a dynamic force. From Marx’s point of view, Lukács could be said to *naturalise* the dynamism of the market, treating the qualitative characteristics the market possesses only *within* a particular social configuration, as an *intrinsic* characteristic, at least once a certain quantitative threshold has been crossed. In this account, the distinctive qualitative social transformations that historically coincide with the emergence of capitalist production are not the result of a qualitatively novel form of social relation, but are instead understood in terms of the quantitative expansion of institutions posited to possess immanent characteristics that were somehow held in check in previ-

<sup>38</sup> Marx’s full argument is a bit more complicated than the slice of the argument I am presenting above. He focuses on free labour as the condition that “comprises a world’s history” due to the analytical centrality of free labour, not simply or mainly as cause, but also as *product*, of capitalist production. The historical circumstances that bring capitalism into being are more complex than the addition of any one new factor: Marx’s discussion of primitive accumulation provides a better sense of how he understands the contingent and messy historical process that resulted in the new configuration he has been analysing in the text. Just as he could not introduce the category of free labour in his opening discussion of the commodity, he is not yet ready to introduce the discussion of primitive accumulation here. My intention above is to clarify the *sort* of argument Marx is making rather than to recount the argument in full.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 274.

<sup>40</sup> Lukács, “Reification,” p. 91.

ous historical periods but become manifest once those institutions become totalising. Unlike Lukács, Marx does not need to claim that market relations become totalised and all-encompassing, nor does he need to reduce all forms of social objectivity and subjectivity back to any single factor. This is because Marx is talking about the emergence of a social relation that is both genuinely new and yet also exhibits distinctive properties that arise as aggregate effects from complex interactions among a number of different component parts. Marx's stance points toward a form of theory that grasps capitalism as an assemblage whose various component parts and subrelations might potentially point in multiple, divergent directions.

How does Marx make clear that he intends to analyse an assemblage of this sort rather than simply identifying a specific, single relation – the exchange of labour for a wage, perhaps – as the central, structuring institution that confers a distinctive social character on labour in capitalist societies? To answer this question, it is important to distinguish what Marx regards as an essential *condition* or *presupposition* of capitalism from the *commodity-relation* implicated in the argument about the fetish character of the commodity. In Marx's argument, the emergence of a labour market figures as a condition for capitalism, and capitalism figures as a condition for generalised commodity production – and therefore for the social validity of the categories expressed in the opening chapter. In spite of this, the impersonal social relation being discussed in the section on the fetish character of the commodity cannot be reduced to the wage relation or to the existence of a labour market. This point becomes clear in Marx's own discussion of the fetish character when he claims to have *already shown* the distinctive social nature of labour under capitalism in the first chapter. Marx writes:

As the foregoing analysis *has already demonstrated*, this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them.<sup>41</sup>

How do we know that the “peculiar social character of the labour” Marx refers to here is *not* the wage relation Marx discusses in chapter six? We know this because Marx says as much *in* chapter six, when he argues that the analysis of wage labour “would have been foreign to the analysis of commodities” – in other words, Marx's argument about the fetish character of the commodity does not depend on his later analysis of wage labour to establish what is peculiar about the social character of the labour that produces commodities.<sup>42</sup> Something *else* must be going on in the first chapter for Marx to claim that the “foregoing analysis has already demonstrated” this peculiar character. So what does Marx believe he has shown?

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

I cannot develop this argument in full in the space available here, but I can at least gesture to the *type* of argument Marx believes he has made. My suggestion is that the “peculiar social character” of commodity-producing labour, as Marx describes it in the opening chapter of *Capital*, consists precisely in the fact that, in capitalism, social actors unintentionally generate a real abstraction – “social labour” – that is distinguished in practice from the aggregate of the empirical labouring activities in which those actors independently engage.<sup>43</sup> Social actors do not set out to generate such an entity, yet they generate it nevertheless – bringing it into existence unintentionally, in Marx’s terms, through the mediation of the products of their hands.

What Marx is doing here is casting an anthropologist’s gaze on an implicit logic of social practice that we indigenous inhabitants of capitalist society take so much for granted that it is difficult for us to appreciate the extent to which this logic pervades our habits of embodiment and perception, practice and thought. In a very preliminary way in the opening chapter, Marx has begun to suggest that there are strange consequences to the actions we undertake in order to survive in a society in which empirical labouring activities are undertaken *speculatively* – without certain knowledge of whether those activities will ultimately be *allowed* to count as part of *social labour*. Marx is arguing that the practice of producing commodities for market exchange in a capitalist context introduces a disjuncture between empirical efforts expended in production and the degree to which those efforts will be rewarded once the products of labour are exchanged on the market.

Marx is suggesting that capitalist production involves the collective enactment of a nonconscious, collective social judgement that determines which empirical activities get to “count” as part of “social labour.” This practical distinction between empirical labours actually undertaken and labours whose products “succeed” in market exchange enlists social actors – wittingly or no – in behaving as though there exists an intangible

<sup>43</sup> One implication of my argument is that at least certain categories of Marx’s work should *not* be conceptualised as idealisations, ideal types, conceptual abstractions, or other forms of theoretical or mental abstraction from an inevitably more complex and messy social reality (as, for example, suggested by Thomas T. Sekine, *An Outline of the Dialectic of Capital*, 2 vols. [London: Macmillan, 1997]) but rather as *real abstractions* (cf. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual*, although I understand the sorts of real abstractions, and their practical enactment, in a different way to Sohn-Rethel) or as “ideals” in the sense analysed by Ilyenkov; he usefully thematises the possibility for a form of abstraction that does not relate to the “sameness” that diverse entities share in common, but rather to the products of “diverse collisions of differently orientated ‘individual wills’” – see Evald Ilyenkov, *The Concept of the Ideal* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977). Overlooking this element in Marx’s argument loses the distinctive “supersensible sensible” character of some of the *socially enacted realities* whose practical constitution Marx is specifically trying to theorise. Concepts like “abstract labour” are not intended, in Marx’s work, as convenient theoretical concepts that simplify a much more diverse social reality: there is a sense in which such abstractions “really do” exist – because social actors *behave as though they do* and thereby *enact them* as socially-existent entities.

entity, “social labour,” that exists both within, and yet distinct from, the aggregate of labouring activities that social actors undertake. This collective behaviour constitutes “social labour” as a practical reality that unintentionally *bestows* a special social status on an elect of privileged labouring activities – but only after the fact, once production is long complete. There is no way for social actors to deduce *in advance*, through a synchronic empirical examination of the sensuous properties of the labour-process or the goods produced, which sorts of activities will succeed in gaining social recognition when cast into market exchange.<sup>44</sup> “Social labour” is therefore, in Marx’s vocabulary, a “supersensible sensible” entity – an abstract, intangible subset of the universe of empirically labouring activities actually undertaken whose composition remains inscrutable at any given moment in time because the category is fundamentally *retroactive*. “Social labour” is a category that *will have been* – a category perpetually out of synch with any given moment in time – something that social actors unintentionally constitute by acting in ways that reduce and distil the labouring activities they have empirically undertaken, down to a smaller subset of labouring activities that are encouraged to reproduce themselves over time because their products have been socially validated through market exchange. The result of this unintentional, collective reduction of empirical labouring activities to those that get to “count” as “social labour” is what Marx has earlier attempted to pick out through the “supersensible sensible” categories of abstract labour and value.

This process – by which empirical labouring activities are culled down to those activities that get to “count” as part of “social labour” – is impersonal and objective in a number of different senses. Marx describes the process as happening “behind the backs” of the social actors whose practices generate it – as unintentional and therefore apparently objective. The process is moreover mediated via the exchange of objects and is thus genuinely carried out via the constitution of “social relations between things.” Also, although this point is only hinted at in the opening chapter, the process involves a strange form of mutual compulsion in which social actors place pressure on one another to conform to average conditions of production, thus resulting in a form of collective “systemic” coercion that is separable from any personal social relations that social actors

<sup>44</sup> Sekine makes a similar point in his analysis of the category of value, arguing: “It can only be found *ex post facto* in the market, not by the sale of this single jacket, but by the repetitive purchase of the same jacket in many samples which establishes its normal price. Value is not an empirically observable quantity [...] Being imperceptible to the senses, value appears to be mysterious substance, and it constitutes the true source of the fetishism of commodities.” Sekine, *Outline*, p. 141. Sekine would not, however, endorse the conclusions I draw above about the way in which this process, for Marx, constitutes a “real abstraction” in which an *intangible entity* acquires a (social) reality because social actors behave as though it exists. Sekine prefers instead to see Marx’s argument in terms of a “capital eye view” of the production process – and, indeed, does not thematise the category of “abstract labour” when discussing the strange counter-empirical character of the category of value.

may also constitute.<sup>45</sup> In each of these respects, Marx argues, the commodity relation is *genuinely* objective and impersonal – there is no illusion of objectivity to be pierced, only an impersonal form of social relation to be grasped and, if possible, overcome.

From this standpoint, it becomes possible to see the forms of thought expressed in the opening sections of the first chapter of *Capital* as socially valid – *even though these forms of thought contradict one another*. The opening “empiricist” voice that perceives use-value and exchange-value, but overlooks the intangible entities of abstract labour and value, is a plausible, but *partial*, perspective that picks up on a particular dimension of the commodity-relation. That is, the dimension that manifests itself in empirical goods and money. The “transcendental” voice picks up on the existence of certain “real abstractions” – certain intangible entities that cannot be directly perceived by the senses but whose existence can be inferred. The “dialectical” voice picks up on the relational and dynamic character of both the sensible and supersensible dimensions of the commodity-relation and analyses the way in which these antinomic phenomena mutually implicate one another and are reproduced together over time. All of these perspectives are reasonable approximations of a *dimension* of social experience under capitalism – and yet they point to theoretical analysis in different directions and suggest very different possibilities for practice. Marx’s own method – which he will develop in much greater detail as *Capital* unfolds – consists in tracing out a wide array of dimensions of social experience and tying these dimensions back to types of formal

<sup>45</sup> The impersonal structural character of this form of domination is developed particularly well in both Sekine’s analysis in *An Outline of the Dialectic of Capital* of the impersonal character of market-mediated compulsion, and Postone’s analysis in *Time, Labor and Social Domination* of the structuration of time in capitalist society which emphasises how innovations in productivity become coercive on other producers, generating a “treadmill effect” in which technical progress fails to reduce the necessity for human labour. Both authors, however, arrive at this conclusion while maintaining a different understanding than the one I am suggesting of “abstract labour.” Sekine posits “abstract labour” as a sort of “capital eye view” of the labour process – a view from which labouring activities are important only as a means to generate value. While I agree that elements of Marx’s analysis do adopt a “capital eye view,” I don’t believe that “abstract labour” is this sort of category; I see the category, instead, as a “real abstraction.” A number of elements of Sekine’s understanding of the commodity, use-value, and other categories differ from the understanding that underlies the reading above, particularly, from the standpoint of the reading I am proposing, by taking certain stances that Marx articulates – especially in the opening definition of use-value – as being absolute definitional claims rather than, as I take them to be, preliminary determinations that must be understood as partial and incomplete. Postone’s work also involves a different interpretation of “abstract labour” as a “function” that labour performs uniquely under capitalism. Postone has in mind Marx’s argument on the importance of free labour for the development of capitalism, to which I refer above. As I explain in the main text, I think it is necessary to distinguish Marx’s argument about the importance of the labour market from the phenomena that Marx is trying to pick out via concepts like “abstract labour” which, in my account, are not references to a special “function” that labour performs but rather attempts to describe an unintentional side effect of aggregate social practice. In Marx’s terms, abstract labour is an “intangible entity” that we make “with the products of our hands.”

theory or popular ideals that express their potentials. With each step, Marx traces the validity, and the limits, of the dimensions of social experience that he analyses, working to differentiate the qualitative characteristics that derive from the overarching process of the reproduction of capital from the potentials that could be released if this overarching process were overcome.

Lukács criticises capitalism for terraforming social existence by covering over the qualitative diversity of sensuous experience with an abstract, formalistic monoculture. His univocal vision of capitalism drives his critique in the direction of a counter-totality even more comprehensive and rational than what he opposes. Marx, by contrast, understands critique as a sort of autopsy performed on a monstrous, Frankensteinian creation. This autopsy enables Marx to demonstrate the stitches that hold the great beast together, to trace the active and sometimes precarious efforts that are continuously required to animate the creature, and to draw attention to the ways in which the history and present potentials of the transplanted parts suggest promising opportunities for future dismemberment and decomposition. These two approaches suggest radically different concepts of the standpoint and target of critique – with Marx’s approach, I suggest, offering far greater possibilities, methodologically and substantively, for reconceptualising capitalism, and its critique, in the contemporary era.