

Marx's distinction between the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism

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Abbreviations

CAP I	<i>Capital. Volume I.</i> Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works Volume 35. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf *
CAP I Ehrbar	<i>Capital. Volume I.</i> Translation project by Hans G.Ehrbar. http://www.econ.utah.edu/~ehrbar/akmc.pdf *
CAP I Penguin	<i>Capital. Volume I.</i> Penguin Classics.
CAP II	<i>Capital. Volume II.</i> Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works Volume 36. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-II.pdf *
CAP III	<i>Capital. Volume III.</i> Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works Volume 37. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-III.pdf *
CAP III Penguin	<i>Capital. Volume III.</i> Penguin Classics.
CoPE	<i>Economic Manuscripts: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.</i> http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch01.htm *
GRUNDRISSE	<i>Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy.</i> Penguin Classics. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Grundrisse.pdf *
MEW 1	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 1. 1839 bis 1844.</i>
MEW 13	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 13. Januar 1859 bis Februar 1860.</i>
MEW 16	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 16. September 1864 bis Juli 1870.</i>
MEW 21	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 21. Mai 1883 bis Dezember 1889.</i>
MEW 23	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 23. Das Kapital. Erster Band.</i>
MEW 24	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 24. Das Kapital. Zweiter Band.</i>
MEW 25	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 25. Das Kapital. Dritter Band.</i>
MEW 26/3	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 26/3. Theorien über den Mehrwert. Teil 3.</i>
MEW 42	<i>Marx Engels Werke Band 42. Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857-1858.</i>
MEW EB1	<i>Marx Engels Werke Ergänzungsband 1. Teil. Schriften, Manuskripte, Briefe bis 1844 - Erster Teil.</i>
ToSV	<i>Theories of Surplus-Value.</i> http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/index.htm

* page numbers given in references refer to PDF file

1. Introduction

Already in his early writings such as the *Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood (1842)*, *Der leitende Artikel in Nr. 179 der »Kölnischen Zeitung« (1842)* and the *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)* Marx uses the expressions ‘fetish’ and ‘fetishism’ (MEW 1, p.147, p.91; MEW EB1, p.532). But it is not until the *Grundrisse (1857)* that Marx embeds their use into his analysis of the commodity or his critique of political economy.

Analysing chapter one section four of *Capital Vol.I*, Ehrbar (2010) points out that Marx draws a conceptual distinction between the ‘fetish character’ and ‘fetishism’. However, Ehrbar does not explain their respective meaning in detail. This essay is an attempt to show that Marx uses the terms ‘fetish character’ and ‘fetishism’ in the following sense: The term ‘fetish character’ describes the regulating social power that objectified value relations gain under capitalism. It is a social power achieved by virtue of a process of autonomisation of reified social relations. Accordingly, the false belief that social properties ascribed to fetish bearing things are natural and inherent to these represents a fetish-induced illusion. Marx designates this illusion as ‘fetishism’. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated how the central features of the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism reappear in other forms of bourgeois production, namely money and capital. These features do even appear in greater clarity in money and capital than they do in the simple commodity. Thereby, it will be shown that evidence for the distinction between the fetish character and fetishism can be found beyond chapter one section four of *Capital Vol.I*.

The sections of this essay are ordered by increasing complexity of their fetish bearing form: Commodity, money and capital. For the most part, the discussion of the fetish character will precede that of fetishism. Hereby, I follow the sequence by which Marx structured his own analysis (c.f. CAP I, p.46-58 [MEW 23, p.85-98]) giving credit to the fact that fetishism is subsequent to the fetish character.

Before starting with the subject, I would like to make some short remarks on the formalities of this essay. I will tacitly choose the citations from the English translation which seems most apt to me. In some cases, explicit remarks will be made on the different translations and slight modifications will be carried out where necessary. The correspondent German references to indirect citations will immediately be given in squared brackets. In the case of direct citations, footnotes quote the relevant passages from the German original. For the sake of simplicity, I intend to use the term ‘fetish’ as a synonym for ‘fetish character’. This is a simplification that Marx himself applied at least in *Capital Vol.III* (c.f. CAP III, pp.255 [MEW 25, pp.404]).

Although Marx never used the expression ‘commodity fetishism’ [‘Warenfetischismus’], most of the literature on Marx’s concept of fetishism calls it that (c.f. Carver 1975, De Angelis 1996, Perlman 1982, Knafo 2002, Rubin 1982). I intend to follow the literature and call ‘commodity fetishism’ what Marx designates as ‘fetishism’.

2. The fetish character of the commodity and commodity fetishism

2.1. The fetish character of the commodity

First of all, it should be made clear that the fetish character of the commodity is not an illusion, but a property of the commodity (Ehrbar 2010, p.425-426). It is not just the way Marx refers to the fetish character, but the very choice of the term itself which already indicates that the fetish character is a defining quality of the commodity. Ehrbar (2010, p.430) draws attention to a quote in which Marx highlights the impossibility of a fetish free commodity. As Marx counts the “personification of things and the reification of persons”¹ (CAP I Ehrbar, p.797) to the intrinsic contradictions of the commodity, he implicitly classifies the fetish character of the commodity as deeply engraved into the nature of the commodity itself. The reification of social relations that gives rise to the commodity fetish is implied in the commodity itself and is inevitable. It even characterises the capitalist mode of production as such (CAP III Penguin, p.1020 [MEW 25, p.887]).

The fetish character of the commodity, which Marx also calls “mystic character”² (CAP I Ehrbar, p.438), originates in the “peculiar social character of the labour” (CAP I Ehrbar, p.469) that gives products their commodity form. Therefore, the fetish originates in production. Although production is ultimately social under capitalism, it is privately organized and carried out by atomised producers. Capitalist production thus entails a conflict between sociality and asociality. An objective mediation between the two extremes of sociality and asociality is established through the process of commodity exchange. The social relation between the producers is thereby established. Instead of consciously creating immediate links between the producers, in place of “rationally regulating [production], bringing it under [...] common control”³ (Cap III, p.571), the social link gets reified and externalized in commodities:

“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

¹ “Personifizierung der Sache und Versachlichung der Personen” (MEW 23, p.128)

² “rätselhafter Charakter” (MEW Bd. 23, p.86)

³ “[die Produktion] rationell [zu] regeln, [sie] unter [...] gemeinschaftliche Kontrolle [zu] bringen” (MEW 25, p.828)

work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things”⁴ (CAP I Penguin, p.165-166).

But value relations objectified in commodities do not only establish the socializing link between producers. From the viewpoint of the individual producer, these objectified value relations even gain autonomy and regulative social power. This non-imaginary regulative social power is twofold: “[R]elations based on the exchange-value of commodities ('social relations of things') come to control the distribution of labour-products *and* the distribution of the labourers themselves within the production process” (Carver 1975, p.51). Thus, the commodity relation entails circularity (Ehrbar 2010, p.457-458). Capitalist social relations have become reified in commodities, which in turn come to act as a regulative force over society. The mystery or the fetish character of the commodity describes this external social force that commodities come to be by virtue of their autonomisation:

“What is mysterious about the commodity form is therefore simply that the social characteristics of men’s own labour are reflected back to them as objective characteristics inherent in the products of their labour, as quasi-physical properties of these things, and that therefore also the social relation of the producers to the aggregate labour is reflected as a social relation of objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this quid pro quo, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time extrasensory or social.”⁵ (CAP I Ehrbar, p.451-452).

The above made quote might create the false impression that the autonomy of social relations gained in their reified commodity form is imaginary. However, Marx makes it clear that he thinks of this autonomy as real and *not* imaginary. Of course, it can only be real towards the individual, but surely not towards society as a whole (c.f. Knafo 2002, p.160). In *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* Marx asserts:

“A social relation of production appears as something existing apart from individual human beings, and the distinctive relations into which they enter in the course of production in society appear as the specific properties of a thing – it is this [inversion]

⁴ “[Den Produzenten] erscheinen daher die gesellschaftlichen Beziehungen ihrer Privatarbeiten als das, was sie sind, d.h. nicht als unmittelbare gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse der Personen in ihren Arbeiten selbst, sondern vielmehr als sachliche Verhältnisse der Personen und gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse der Sachen.“ (MEW 23, p.87)

⁵ “Das Geheimnisvolle der Warenform besteht also einfach darin, daß sie den Menschen die gesellschaftlichen Charaktere ihrer eignen Arbeit als gegenständliche Charaktere der Arbeitsprodukte selbst, als gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften dieser Dinge zurückspiegelt, daher auch das gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Produzenten zur Gesamtarbeit als ein außer ihnen existierendes gesellschaftliches Verhältnis von Gegenständen. Durch dies Quidproquo werden die Arbeitsprodukte Waren, sinnlich übersinnliche oder gesellschaftliche Dinge.“ (MEW 23, p.86)

and [...] prosaically real, and by no means imaginary, mystification that is characteristic of all social forms of labour positing exchange-value”⁶ (CoPE)

Summing up this section, the fetish character describes as real regulative social power, which reified social relations gain under capitalism by virtue of a preceding process of autonomisation. In this notion of the fetish character many philosophical concepts that Marx deployed in his earlier writings, particularly in his theory of alienation, reappear partly implicitly, partly explicitly. For example, there is a return of the Feuerbachian concept of the ‘subject-predicate inversion’ that Marx had applied to the bourgeois state and money in his 1843/1844 writings. The ‘subject-predicate inversion’ describes the subordination of the primary, i.e. the human being, to the predicate, i.e. the man made product. Furthermore, there is a return of the ‘externalisation’ [‘Entäußerung’] theme that is omnipresent in the *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)*. Perlman (1982, p.XXIV) even claims that “through the theory of commodity fetishism, the concept of reified labour becomes the link between the theory of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the theory of value in *Capital*.” For the sake of precision, “theory of commodity fetishism” should be substituted by “theory of the fetish character of the commodity” in Perlman’s quote.

2.2. Fetishism - The naturalisation of social properties

In opposition to the fetish character, Marx does not use the term fetishism in reference to a *property* possessed by the commodity. Fetishism is *not* an inherent feature of the commodity. “Fetishism [...] *attaches* itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and [...] is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities”⁷ (CAP I, p.47; italics added).

Because fetishism is a misconception of the fetish (Ehrbar 2010, p.465), the historical character of fetishism follows directly from the historical character of the commodity fetish. As long as there is commodity production, the fetish will cause the illusion of fetishism. But what exactly is this illusion comprised of?

Fetishism is a kind of mystification based on an inverse understanding of what is social and what is natural. In *Capital Vol.II*, Marx gives a straight forward explication of what he means by fetishism: “[F]etishism [...] metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things

⁶ “Dass ein gesellschaftliches Produktionsverhältnis sich als ein außer den Individuen vorhandener Gegenstand und die bestimmten Beziehungen, die wie im Produktionsprozess ihres gesellschaftlichen Lebens eingehen, sich als spezifische Eigenschaft eines Dings darstellen, diese Verkehrung und nicht eingebildete, sondern prosaisch reelle Mystifikation charakterisiert alle gesellschaftlichen Formen der tauschwertsetzenden Arbeit.” (MEW 13, p.35)

⁷ “[...] Fetischismus, der den Arbeitsprodukten anklebt, sobald sie als Waren produziert werden, und der daher von der Warenproduktion unzertrennlich ist.” (MEW 23, p.86-87)

in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things”⁸ (CAP II, p.135).

Marx also specifies which subjects actually engage in fetishism. He states that fetishism is “*peculiar to bourgeois Political Economy*”⁹ (CAP II, p.135; italics added). Almost every time that he talks about fetishism, he alludes to Political Economy being deceived by it (c.f. GRUNDRISSE, p.369 [MEW 42, p.588]; CAP I, p.51 [MEW 23, p.97]; CAP III, p.256 [MEW 25, p.405-406]; CAP III, p.261 [MEW 25, p.412]; ToSV ||817| [MEW 26/3, p.126]). Marx blames Political Economy for its incapacity to grasp the historical character of the value substance, i.e. abstract labour, and for unreflectively presupposing value form without investigating its origin (Elbe 2005, p.7).

However, fetishism is certainly not a phenomenon peculiar to Political Economy of Marx’s time only. Contemporary orthodox economic theory engages in very similar fetishism when it comes to, for example, their conception of capital. In what may be the most read textbook for Economics, Gregory Mankiw’s *Principles of Economics*, the former chairman of President George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisors defines capital as “the stock of equipment and structures used for production. That is, the economy’s capital represents the accumulation of goods produced in the past that are being used in the present to produce new goods and services” (Mankiw 2008, p.406). Following this ahistorical logic, the stone used by the caveman to open nuts was already capital (c.f. ToSP ||921| [MEW 26/3, p.491]).

Returning to Marx, Political Economy’s fetishism can be further specified in philosophical terms:

“The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the natural properties of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them”¹⁰ (GRUNDRISSE, p.369).

Marx claims that fetishism of Political Economy is both, crude materialism and crude idealism. Concerning crude materialism, Marx accuses Political Economy of naturalising social

⁸ “Fetischismus [verwandelt] den gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen Charakter, welchen Dinge im gesellschaftlichen Produktionsprozeß aufgeprägt erhalten, in einen natürlichen, aus der stofflichen Natur dieser Dinge entspringenden Charakter [...]” (MEW 24, p.228)

⁹ “der bürgerlichen Ökonomie eigentümliche Fetischismus” (MEW 24, p.228)

¹⁰ “Der grobe Materialismus der Ökonomen, die gesellschaftlichen Produktionsverhältnisse der Menschen und die Bestimmungen, die die Sachen erhalten, als unter diese Verhältnisse subsumiert, als natürliche Eigenschaften der Dinge zu betrachten, ist ein ebenso grober Idealismus, ja Fetischismus, der den Dingen gesellschaftliche Beziehungen aus ihnen immanente Bestimmungen zuschreibt und sie so mystifiziert.” (MEW 42, p.588)

properties, to annul the distinction between physical and social qualities of products of labour in favour of their physical qualities. The naturalisation of social relations reflects what Engels (1999a) calls vulgar materialism's "inability to comprehend the [world] as a process, as matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development"¹¹.

Besides being crude materialism, Marx claims that fetishism is crude ontological idealism. This ontological idealism consists in the idea that "the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production [stems] from the material nature of those things"¹² (CAP II, p.135). The commodity form that products of labour assume under Capitalism is hence misconceived as prior to the social relations of production that gave rise to it. In this sense fetishism may actually be called a kind of epiphenomenal ideology - a set of beliefs which mirrors the inverted reality of capitalism (c.f. Clegg 2008, p.8).

However, it would be inaccurate to call fetishism a kind of functionalist ideology by which the 'false consciousness' of the proletariat perpetuates the prevailing social relations of exploitation. This follows immediately from Marx's rejection of the concept of functional ideology (Clegg 2008, p.3-4). Despite this rejection, it may yet be possible that the proletariat or society as a whole is falling victim to fetishism. Rubin (1982, p.59) for example holds that fetishism is a "phenomenon of social consciousness". Considering the fact that Marx never accuses the proletariat or ordinary people to engage in fetishism, Rubin's interpretation of Marx's concept of fetishism seems quite odd.

2.3. General remarks on the distinction between the fetish character and fetishism

Ehrbar (2010) pointed out various imprecisions in the English translations that make it nearly impossible to detect the distinction that Marx makes between the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism. The crudest imprecision surely is the wrong translation of the title of chapter one passage four of *Capital Vol.I*. The German 'Fetischcharakter' has been falsely translated as 'Fetishism' in the Collected Works and Penguin version of *Capital Vol.I* (Ehrbar 2010, p.427). In terms of the contents, the distinction was noted by various scholars before Ehrbar. Geras (1971) comes quite close to noticing a clear conceptual distinction between fetish and fetishism. He holds that the "phenomenon of fetishism" is twofold and entails the elements of "domination" and "mystification" (Geras 1971, p.72). In the sense the terms fetish and fetishism are used in this essay, "domination" maps well onto the concept of the fetish, whereas "mystification" refers to fetishism. Knafo (2002, p.159-160), Carver (1975, p.53; p.55) and

¹¹ "Beschränktheit dieses Materialismus bestand in seiner Unfähigkeit, die Welt als einen Prozeß, als einen in einer geschichtlichen Fortbildung begriffenen Stoff aufzufassen." (MEW 21, p.278-279)

¹² "den gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen Charakter, welchen Dinge im gesellschaftlichen Produktionsprozeß aufgeprägt erhalten, in einen natürlichen, aus der stofflichen Natur dieser Dinge entspringenden Charakter verwandelt" (MEW 24, p.228)

Rubin (1982, p.59) also elaborate the contents of both sides, but do not keep them conceptually separated.

Yet, inconsistencies in the translations cannot be the sole reason for the conceptual distinction staying undetected for so long. Marx himself was also contributing to the veiling of the difference. At the beginning of chapter one section four of *Capital Vol.I* (CAP I, p.47 [MEW 23, p.87]) he uses an analogy of religion to describe “the social reality of religion by how individuals perceive it“ (Ehrbar 2010, p.462). Here, Ehrbar (2010, p.462) attentively spotted that Marx “tacitly switches over [from a discussion on] the fetish-like character of the commodity [to a discussion on] fetishism“. The social reality of religion corresponds to the real fetish character of the commodity whereas the illusive perception of it corresponds to fetishism. It is not clear though, why Ehrbar (2010, p.462) believes that the commodity producers are falling victim to the illusion of fetishism.

3. Engels confusing the money fetish with money fetishism?

The commodity fetish gets passed on to money simultaneously to the process of a certain commodity assuming the value-form of money. Under a new guise the general features of the fetish character of the commodity now express themselves in the particular money commodity, which managed to assume the monopolized position of the general equivalent form of value (c.f. CAP I, p.62-65 [MEW 23, p.104-108]). Attention shall now be given to this money fetish and subsequent money fetishism.

In 1868, Engels wrote a condensed summary of *Capital Vol.I* called *Synopsis of Capital. Volume I* (Engels 1999b). Based on a citation taken from this Synopsis, it will be shown that Engels either was not aware of the distinction between the two concepts of money fetish and fetishism, or misinterpreted the quote that he borrowed from chapter two of *Capital Vol.I* as an instance of fetishism. However, it would certainly be a bit of a stretch to claim that Engels was completely uninformed about the difference between fetishism and fetish character just on the basis of his confusion or misinterpretation in this particular case.

Instead of taking the citation from the English translation of the Synopsis, it is more sensible to directly quote from *Capital Vol.I*, because this is where Engels copied his quote. The only word that Engels added is the word “fetishism“. The English translation (Engels 1999b) contains some strange modifications and the words “belief in a supernatural power of objects” were added in brackets, although nothing of that is in the German original (MEW 16, p.246). The quote reads:

“Fetishism: Although a particular commodity only becomes money because all other commodities express their values in it, it seems, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in a particular commodity because it is money.”¹³ (CAP I Ehrbar, p.651-652)

Indeed, the sentence cited seems to describe the false belief that money would naturally possess the universal equivalent form of value. But if the sentence is put back into the context of the paragraph (CAP I Ehrbar p.651-654 [MEW 23, p.107-108]), it becomes clear that it rather describes the money fetish than fetishism (c.f. Ehrbar 2010, p.653).

In that particular paragraph, Marx explains how commodities encounter the finished shape of the form of their own value in the “body of a commodity existing outside and alongside them”¹⁴ (CAP I Ehrbar, p.653). Of course, this particular commodity is money. It is no illusion, that the money commodity, once it has adopted the specific value form of money, becomes quasi-autonomous and has the power to effectively force all other commodities to express their value in it. Money constitutes the “immediate incarnation of all human labour”¹⁵ (CAP I Ehrbar, p.653) and therefore a priori assumes equivalent form in exchange relations of commodities. Money has thereby become a subject that has the actual power to regulate commodity exchange. But money does not possess these features because it is money, but because social relations have been reified in it. This is what essentially constitutes the money fetish. But money could only gain this non-imaginary position of autonomy by the mediating process of innumerable exchanges expressing certain social relations. However, it should be kept in mind that the kind of autonomy gained by money cannot be autonomy from society, but autonomy from the individual private producers and individual acts of exchange. In the autonomisation of money “the movement which mediated this process vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind” (CAP I Ehrbar, p.653). The last aspect may be called ‘result-prerequisite inversion’. Although money is the result of certain social and exchange relations, it now becomes the prerequisite of exchange. But the process that spawned this result cannot be detected in money anymore. Ehrbar (2010, p.458) claims the fetish character of the commodity entails something akin to the ‘result-prerequisite inversion’.

Finally, in the last sentence of the paragraph, Marx makes it clear that he talks about the money fetish and not about fetishism. He also relates the money fetish to the commodity fetish: “The riddle of the money fetish is therefore merely the riddle of the commodity fetish, has become

¹³ “Fetischismus: eine Ware scheint nicht erst Geld zu werden, weil die andern Waren allseitig ihre Werte in ihr darstellen, sondern sie scheinen umgekehrt ihre Werte in ihr darzustellen, weil sie *Geld* ist.” (MEW 16, p.246)

¹⁴ “als einen außer und neben ihnen existierenden Warenkörper” (MEW 23, p.107)

¹⁵ “die unmittelbare Inkarnation aller menschlichen Arbeit” (MEW 23, p.107)

visible and blinding the eyes“¹⁶ (CAP I Ehrbar, p.654). The commodity fetish is explicit and more striking in the money fetish, but at the same time it becomes more difficult to demystify it (c.f. CAP I Ehrbar, p.562-563 [MEW 23, p.97]; CoPE [MEW 13, p.35]).

Admittedly, Marx could have been clearer in explaining the money fetish and its difference from the false perception of it, which is fetishism. Nevertheless, the above made interpretation of the paragraph from which Engels' citation was taken should suffice to indicate that Marx's intention most probably was to highlight the kernel truth of the sentence cited by Engels, i.e. the fetish character of money, and not the false belief of money naturally possessing the form of the universal equivalent, i.e. fetishism.

4. The completion of the capital fetish and its fetishism in interest-bearing capital

Commodity, money and capital are all forms of bourgeois production. Whereas “the commodity-form is the most general and the most underdeveloped form of bourgeois production”¹⁷ (CAP I Penguin, p.176), capital constitutes the most concrete and complex form among the mentioned three. The previous sections have discussed the peculiar features of the commodity and the money fetish, as well as those of their subsequent fetishism. The following analysis focussing on *Capital Vol.III*'s chapter on “Externalization of the Relations of Capital in the Form of Interest-Bearing Capital”¹⁸ (CAP III, p.255) will now consider the fetish character of capital and its fetishism. The intention is to show that the features of the commodity fetish as well as those of its attached fetishism reappear in interest-bearing capital. The features already reappear in capital, but in interest-bearing capital the “fetish character of capital and the [conception] of this capital fetish [become] now complete“¹⁹ (CAP III, Penguin, p.516). This short quote already indicates that Marx actually distinguishes between the capital fetish as a property inherent to (interest-bearing) capital and the false conception of the fetish, i.e. fetishism. If capital fetish and capital fetishism were the same thing, why would he mention them separately?

Just like the title, the opening sentence of the chapter makes the reappearance of the fetish's theme of externalisation of social relations explicit: “The relations of capital assume their most

¹⁶ “Das Rätsel des Geldfetichs ist daher nur das sichtbar gewordene, die Augen blendende Rätsel des Warenfetichs.“ (MEW 23, p.108)

¹⁷ “die Warenform die allgemeinste und unentwickelteste Form der bürgerlichen Produktion ist“ (MEW 23, p.97)

¹⁸ “Veräußerlichung des Kapitalverhältnisses in der Form des zinstragenden Kapitals“ (MEW 25, p.404)

¹⁹ “Hier ist die Fetischgestalt des Kapitals und die Vorstellung vom Kapitalfetisch fertig.“ (MEW 25, p.405)

externalised and most fetish-like form in interest-bearing capital”²⁰ (CAP III, p.255). David Fernbach’s translation of the title and the opening sentence in Penguin’s version of *Capital Vol.III* is appallingly wrong. He falsely translates “Veräußerlichung” as “Superficial Form” and “fetischartig” as “fetishized” (CAP III Penguin, p.515). By the first mistake, he misses that social relations have been actually externalized in interest-bearing capital, by the second, he turns the fetish-bearing subject into the fetishised object. Although it is certainly true that Political Economy treats interest-bearing capital as its fetishised object, the translation stays wrong.

As it has already been the case for the commodity and money, inversion and reification of social relations of production form the base for the fetish character of interest-bearing capital. In fact they climax in interest-bearing capital and give it “pure fetish form”²¹ (CAP III Penguin, p.517). The aforementioned ‘result-prerequisite inversion’ that occurred in the money fetish, also returns in a perverted way in the fetish of interest-bearing capital, because prerequisite coincidences with the result in its reproduction. Thus, Marx says that interest-bearing capital appears merely as a “form without content”²² (CAP III, p.255). The following quote will illustrate both aspects:

”In M–M’ we have the meaningless form of capital, the [inversion] and [reification] of production relations in their highest degree, the interest-bearing form, the simple form of capital, in which it antecedes its own process of reproduction; [...] capacity of money, or of a commodity, to expand its own value independently of reproduction – which is a mystification of capital in its most flagrant form”²³ (CAP III, p.256).

Certainly, this is a confusing quote that needs to be deciphered. It seems that Marx starts with a description of the fetish character of interest-bearing capital referring to inversion and reification, and then tacitly switches over to the description of capital fetishism. A similar instance already occurred in *Capital Vol.I* (c.f. Ehbar 2010, p.462). We can find strong support for this interpretation in a more elaborated version of the very same passage, which can be found in *Theories of Surplus-Value* (ToSV ||917| [MEW 26/3, p.484-485]). In contrast to *Capital Vol.III*, the division into a description of the fetish and a description of fetishism is done quite clearly in the extended version: The first part explicitly describes the completion of the

²⁰ “Im zinstragenden Kapital erreicht das Kapitalverhältnis seine äußerlichste und fetischartigste Form.“ (MEW 25, p.404)

²¹ “reine Fetischform“ (MEW 25, p.406)

²² “inhaltslose Form“ (MEW 25, p.405)

²³ “In G - G’ haben wir die begriffslose Form des Kapitals, die Verkehrung und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse in der höchsten Potenz: zinstragende Gestalt, die einfache Gestalt des Kapitals, worin es seinem eignen Reproduktionsprozeß vorausgesetzt ist; Fähigkeit des Geldes, resp. der Ware, ihren eignen Wert zu verwerten, unabhängig von der Reproduktion - die Kapitalmystifikation in der grellsten Form.“ (MEW 25, p. 405)

“character and form of capital”²⁴ (ToSV ||917) and involves the common themes of the fetish character. The second part, however, deals with the “[re]presentation”²⁵ (ToSV ||917) of the character and form of capital. Marx closes the second part with the words: “The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete”²⁶ (ToSV ||917). By transubstantiation Marx means the imagined transformation of a ‘human being-human being’ relation into a ‘human being-thing’ relation.

Another central aspect of the fetish character that reappears in interest-bearing capital is the autonomisation of reified social relations. Autonomisation reaches its climax in interest-bearing capital consequent to the extreme “[inversion] and [reification] of production relations”²⁷ (CAP III, p.256). It has gone thus far that money in the form of interest-bearing capital does not need to bear reference to anything but itself. The following quote, which includes another reference to the ‘result-prerequisite inversion’, gives evidence for the vast scope of autonomy that money gained in the form of interest-bearing capital:

“The *thing* (money, commodity, value) is now capital even as a mere thing, and capital appears as a mere thing. The result of the entire process of reproduction appears as a property inherent in the thing itself. [...] In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, are brought out in their pure state and in this form it no longer bears the birth-marks of its origin. The social relation is consummated in the relation of a thing, of money, to itself”²⁸ (CAP III, p.255)

Although, the quotes given above illustrated quite well how the themes of inversion, reification and autonomisation reappear in the fetish of interest-bearing capital, its result has not been mentioned yet. The result is that capital, i.e. dead labour, confronts society as an alien, objectified, social force reigning over living labour. Marx mentions this while highlighting the socio-historical and therefore surmountable character of dead labour’s domination:

“[In contrast, we] know [...] that the domination of the products of past labour over living surplus-labour lasts only as long as the relations of capital, which rest on those

²⁴ “Charakter und die Gestalt des Kapitals“ (MEW 26/3, p.484)

²⁵ “Darstellung” (MEW 26/3, p.484)

²⁶ “Die Transsubstantion, der Fetischismus ist vollendet.” (MEW 26/3, p.485)

²⁷ “Verkehrung und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse” (MEW 25, p.405)

²⁸ “Das Ding (Geld, Ware, Wert) ist nun als bloßes Ding schon Kapital, und das Kapital erscheint als bloßes Ding; das Resultat des gesamten Reproduktionsprozesses erscheint als eine, einem Ding von selbst zukommende Eigenschaft; [...] Im zintragenden Kapital ist daher dieser automatische Fetisch rein herausgearbeitet, der sich selbst verwertende Wert, Geld heckendes Geld, und trägt es in dieser Form keine Narben seiner Entstehung mehr. Das gesellschaftliche Verhältnis ist vollendet als Verhältnis eines Dings, des Geldes, zu sich selbst.“ (MEW 25, p.405)

particular social relations in which past labour independently and overwhelmingly dominates over living labour”²⁹ (CAP III, p.261).

In chapter 15 of *Capital Vol.III*, Marx makes another even more explicit remark on the hostile social power that capital comes to be (c.f. CAP III, p.179 [MEW 25, p.274]). Although this particular remark is not directly linked to Marx discussion on the fetish of interest-bearing capital, the relatedness to the concept of the fetish is quite obvious.

So far, mostly the fetish character of interest-bearing capital has been considered. As it was in the case for the commodity and money, the false perception of the capital fetish, i.e. capital fetishism, is subsequent to the capital fetish: “The distorted form [of interest-bearing capital] in which the real inversion is expressed is naturally reproduced in the views of the agents of this mode of production”³⁰ (ToSV ||XV-891|). The false perception consists in naturalising its capacity to bear interest and to completely disconnect it from the process of value creation, which is the process of production:

“Now, the [conception] of [the capital fetish] reaches its height in interest-bearing capital, being a [conception] which attributes to the accumulated product of labour, and at that in the fixed form of money, the inherent secret power, as an automaton, of creating surplus-value in geometrical progression, so that the accumulated product of labour, as [»The] Economist[«] thinks, has long discounted all the wealth of the world for all time as belonging to it and rightfully coming to it”³¹ (CAP III, p.261).

There are three clear indications that Marx refers to fetishism and not to the fetish of interest-bearing capital in this passage. First, he uses the expression “conception of the capital fetish” instead of “capital fetish”. Second, he instantly gives an example of Political Economy holding this conception by alluding to its mouthpiece, *The Economist*. And third, he passes some scathing criticism on Political Economy making clear that in reality things are the exact opposite of Political Economy’s conception. This is the reason why Marx starts his criticism of capital fetishism that was cited above with the words “*In contrast, we know*”³² (own translation, italics added). Interestingly, Marx partly excludes Classical Political Economy from the deception caused by the capital fetish. He highly acknowledges that classical political economy

²⁹ “Man weiß dagegen, daß [...] das Kommando der Produkte vergangner Arbeit über lebendige Mehrarbeit grade nur so lange dauert, wie das Kapitalverhältnis dauert, das bestimmte soziale Verhältnis, worin die vergangne Arbeit selbständig und übermächtig der lebendigen gegenübertritt.“ (MEW 25, p. 412)

³⁰ “Die verdrehte Form [des zintragenden Kapitals], worin die wirkliche Verdrehung sich ausdrückt, findet sich natürlich reproduziert in den Vorstellungen der Agenten dieser Produktionsweise.” (MEW 26/3, p.445)

³¹ “In dem zintragenden Kapital ist aber die Vorstellung vom Kapitalfetisch vollendet, die Vorstellung, die dem aufgehäuften Arbeitsprodukt, und noch dazu fixiert als Geld, die Kraft zuschreibt, durch eine eingeborne geheime Qualität, als reiner Automat, in geometrischer Progression Mehrwert zu erzeugen, so daß dies aufgehäuften Arbeitsprodukt, wie der »Economist« meint, allen Reichtum der Welt für alle Zeiten als ihm von Rechts wegen gehörig und zufallend schon längst diskontiert hat.“ (MEW 25, p.412)

³² “Man weiß dagegen“ (MEW 25, p.412)

has shown that interest and rent both derive from surplus-value and thereby “dissolved [the] false appearance and deception, this autonomization and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another, this personification of things and reification of the relations of production”³³ (CAP III Penguin p.969). By contrast, he particularly accuses Vulgar Political Economy of engaging in capital fetishism. As the fetish character of interest-bearing capital has completely veiled the process of value creation, vulgar political economy “seeks to present capital as an independent source of wealth”³⁴ (CAP III Penguin, p.517).

5. Conclusion

At first sight, there seems to be no distinction between Marx’s concept of the fetish character of the commodity and fetishism. Although not easy to spot, especially in the English translations, a close reading of the German original writings reveals that there is indeed a distinction. Ehrbar (2010) already pointed out that the central difference between the two consists in the objective social basis of the fetish character and the subjective illusion that constitutes fetishism. However, his analysis is rather incomplete. It fails to describe in detail what Marx exactly means by the fetish character and fetishism and it stays limited to the context of *Capital Vol.I*. This essay’s task was to provide further evidence for the distinction between the fetish character and fetishism, as well as to clarify their respective meaning. The approach chosen to carry out this task included an analysis of more developed forms of bourgeois production, namely money and capital. The analysis was conducted on the basis of various works of Marx he had written after 1857.

It was shown, that the fetish character is constituted by the externalised social power that has been reified in different forms of bourgeois production. Under capitalism, value relations objectified in commodities come to take over regulative social functions by virtue of the autonomy they gained towards the atomised individual. Whereas the fetish character describes a non-illusory social force, fetishism is an illusion that is caused by the fetish. Fetishism is hence a fetish induced kind of epiphenomenal ideology. Marx denounces Political Economy of engaging in fetishism, because it misconceives social traits objectified in the commodity, money or capital as natural ones which are inherent to the thing. As the fetish character of the commodity gets passed on to the more concrete forms like money and capital, it advances and

³³ “diesen falschen Schein und Trug, diese Verselbständigung und Verknöcherung der verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Elemente des Reichtums gegeneinander, diese Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse [...] aufgelöst zu haben” (MEW 25, p.838)

³⁴ “die Vulgärökonomie, die das Kapital als selbständige Quelle des Werts, der Wertschöpfung, darstellen will“ (MEW 25, p.405-406)

appears under a modified guise. Each form's fetish then inevitably creates its respective fetishism in bourgeois economic thought.

It is unlikely that the long undetected insight of the fetish character-fetishism distinction would actually make a revision of the literature on Marx's theory of 'commodity fetishism' necessary. The novelty is merely the conceptual distinction, but its contents were well known to Marxian scholars before. However, there might be a valuable conclusion to draw from this essay. This is the identification of the fetish character concept as a very clear continuation and refined version of the philosophic themes that revolve around Marx's earlier theory of alienation, and fetishism as a kind of epiphenomenal ideology.

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