

I How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?

Marx, Freud: the analysis of form

According to Lacan, it was none other than Karl Marx who invented the notion of symptom. Is this Lacanian thesis just a sally of wit, a vague analogy, or does it possess a pertinent theoretical foundation? If Marx really articulated the notion of the symptom as it is also at work in the Freudian field, then we must ask ourselves the Kantian question, concerning the epistemological 'conditions of possibility' of such an encounter: how was it possible for Marx, in his analysis of the world of commodities, to produce a notion which applies also to the analysis of dreams, hysterical phenomena, and so on?

The answer is that there is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud – more precisely, between their analysis of commodity and of dreams. In both cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, *the 'secret' of this form itself*. The theoretical intelligence of the form of dreams does not consist in penetrating from the manifest content to its 'hidden kernel', to the latent dream-thoughts; it consists in the answer to the question: why have the latent dream-thoughts assumed such a form, why were they transposed into the form of a dream? It is the same with commodities: the real problem is not to penetrate to the 'hidden

kernel' of the commodity – the determination of its value by the quantity of the work consumed in its production – but to explain why work assumed the form of the value of a commodity, why it can affirm its social character only in the commodity-form of its product.

The notorious reproach of 'pansexualism' addressed at the Freudian interpretation of dreams is already a commonplace. Hans-Jürgen Eysenck, a severe critic of psychoanalysis, long ago observed a crucial paradox in the Freudian approach to dreams: according to Freud, the desire articulated in a dream is supposed to be – as a rule, at least – unconscious and at the same time of a sexual nature, which contradicts the majority of examples analysed by Freud himself, starting with the dream he chose as an introductory case to exemplify the logic of dreams, the famous dream of Irma's injection. The latent thought articulated in this dream is Freud's attempt to get rid of the responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma, a patient of his, by means of arguments of the type 'it was not my fault, it was caused by a series of circumstances . . .'; but this 'desire', the meaning of the dream, is obviously neither of a sexual nature (it rather concerns professional ethics) nor unconscious (the failure of Irma's treatment was troubling Freud day and night).¹

This kind of reproach is based on a fundamental theoretical error: the identification of the unconscious desire at work in the dream with the 'latent thought' – that is, the signification of the dream. But as Freud continually emphasizes, *there is nothing 'unconscious' in the 'latent dream-thought'*: this thought is an entirely 'normal' thought which can be articulated in the syntax of everyday, common language; topologically, it belongs to the system of 'consciousness/preconsciousness'; the subject is usually aware of it, even excessively so; it harasses him all the time . . . Under certain conditions this thought is pushed away, forced out of the consciousness, drawn into the unconscious – that is, submitted to the laws of the 'primary process', translated into the 'language of the unconscious'. The relationship between the 'latent thought' and what is called the

1 Hans Jürgen Eysenck, *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.

‘manifest content’ of a dream – the text of the dream, the dream in its literal phenomenality – is therefore that between some entirely ‘normal’, (pre)conscious thought and its translation into the ‘rebus’ of the dream. The essential constitution of dream is thus not its ‘latent thought’ but this work (the mechanisms of displacement and condensation, the figuration of the contents of words or syllables) which confers on it the form of a dream.

Herein, then, lies the basic misunderstanding: if we seek the ‘secret of the dream’ in the latent content hidden by the manifest text, we are doomed to disappointment: all we find is some entirely ‘normal’ – albeit usually unpleasant – thought, the nature of which is mostly non-sexual and definitely not ‘unconscious’. This ‘normal’, conscious/preconscious thought is not drawn towards the unconscious, repressed simply because of its ‘disagreeable’ character for the conscious, but because it achieves a kind of ‘short circuit’ between it and another desire which is already repressed, located in the unconscious, *a desire which has nothing whatsoever to do with the ‘latent dream-thought’*. ‘A normal train of thought’ – normal and therefore one which can be articulated in common, everyday language: that is, in the syntax of the ‘secondary process’ – ‘is only submitted to the abnormal psychical treatment of the sort we have been describing’ – to the dream-work, to the mechanisms of the ‘primary process’ – ‘if an unconscious wish, derived from infancy and in a state of repression, has been transferred on to it’.²

It is this unconscious/sexual desire which cannot be reduced to a ‘normal train of thought’ because it is, from the very beginning, constitutively repressed (Freud’s *Unverdrängung*) – because it has no ‘original’ in the ‘normal’ language of everyday communication, in the syntax of the conscious/preconscious; its only place is in the mechanisms of the ‘primary process’. This is why we should not reduce the interpretation of dreams, or symptoms in general, to the retranslation of the ‘latent dream-thought’ into the ‘normal’, everyday common language of inter-subjective

2 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

communication (Habermas's formula). The structure is always triple; there are always *three* elements at work: the *manifest dream-text*, the *latent dream-content* or thought and the *unconscious desire* articulated in a dream. This desire attaches itself to the dream, it intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text; it is therefore not 'more concealed, deeper' in relation to the latent thought, it is decidedly more 'on the surface', consisting entirely of the signifier's mechanisms, of the treatment to which the latent thought is submitted. In other words, its only place is in the *form* of the 'dream': the real subject matter of the dream (the unconscious desire) articulates itself in the dream-work, in the elaboration of its 'latent content'.

As is often the case with Freud, what he formulates as an empirical observation (although of 'quite surprising frequency') announces a fundamental, universal principle: 'The form of a dream or the form in which it is dreamt is used with quite surprising frequency for representing its concealed subject matter'.³ This, then, is the basic paradox of the dream: the unconscious desire, that which is supposedly its most hidden kernel, articulates itself precisely through the dissimulation work of the 'kernel' of a dream, its latent thought, through the work of disguising this content-kernel by means of its translation into the dream-rebus. Again, as characteristically, Freud gave this paradox its final formulation in a footnote added in a later edition:

I used at one time to find it extraordinarily difficult to accustom readers to the distinction between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts. Again and again arguments and objections would be brought up based upon some uninterpreted dream in the form in which it had been retained in the memory, and the need to interpret it would be ignored. But now that analysts at least have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of

3 Ibid., p. 446.

falling into another confusion which they cling to with an equal obstinacy. They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work.

At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.⁴

Freud proceeds here in two stages:

- First, we must break the appearance according to which a dream is nothing but a simple and meaningless confusion, a disorder caused by physiological processes and as such having nothing whatsoever to do with signification. In other words, we must accomplish a crucial step towards a hermeneutical approach and conceive the dream as a meaningful phenomenon, as something transmitting a repressed message which has to be discovered by an interpretative procedure;
- Then we must get rid of the fascination in this kernel of signification, in the ‘hidden meaning’ of the dream – that is to say, in the content concealed behind the form of a dream – and centre our attention on this form itself, on the dream-work to which the ‘latent dream-thoughts’ were submitted.

The crucial thing to note here is that we find exactly the same articulation in two stages with Marx, in his analysis of the ‘secret of the commodity-form’:

- First, we must break the appearance according to which the value of a commodity depends on pure hazard – on an accidental interplay

4 Ibid., p. 650.

between supply and demand, for example. We must accomplish the crucial step of conceiving the hidden 'meaning' behind the commodity-form, the signification 'expressed' by this form; we must penetrate the 'secret' of the value of commodities:

The determination of the magnitude of value by labour-time is therefore a secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations in the relative values of commodities. Its discovery, while removing all appearance of mere accidentality from the determination of the magnitude of the values of products, yet in no way alters the mode in which that determination takes place.⁵

- But as Marx points out, there is a certain 'yet': the unmasking of the secret is not sufficient. Classical bourgeois political economy has already discovered the 'secret' of the commodity-form; its limit is that it is not able to disengage itself from this fascination in the secret hidden behind the commodity-form – that its attention is captivated by labour as the true source of wealth. In other words, classical political economy is interested only in contents concealed behind the commodity-form, which is why it cannot explain the true secret, not the secret behind the form but the secret of this form itself. In spite of its quite correct explanation of the 'secret of the magnitude of value', the commodity remains for classical political economy a mysterious, enigmatic thing – it is the same as with the dream: even after we have explained its hidden meaning, its latent thought, the dream remains an enigmatic phenomenon; what is not yet explained is simply its form, the process by means of which the hidden meaning disguised itself in such a form.

We must, then, accomplish another crucial step and analyse the genesis of the commodity-form itself. It is not sufficient to reduce the form to the essence, to the hidden kernel, we must also examine the process – homologous to the ‘dream-work’ – by means of which the concealed content assumes such a form, because, as Marx points out: ‘Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself’.⁶ It is this step towards the genesis of the form that classical political economy cannot accomplish, and this is its crucial weakness:

Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product.⁷

The unconscious of the commodity-form

Why did the Marxian analysis of the commodity-form – which, *prima facie*, concerns a purely economic question – exert such an influence in the general field of social sciences; why has it fascinated generations of philosophers, sociologists, art historians, and others? Because it offers a kind of matrix enabling us to generate all other forms of the ‘fetishistic inversion’: it is as if the dialectics of the commodity-form presents us with a pure – distilled, so to speak – version of a mechanism offering us a key to the theoretical understanding of phenomena which, at first sight, have nothing whatsoever to do with the field of political economy (law, religion, and so on). In the commodity-form there is definitely more at stake than the commodity-form itself, and it was precisely this ‘more’ which exerted such

6 Ibid., p. 76.

7 Alfred Sohn Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, London: Macmillan, 1978, p. 31.

a fascinating power of attraction. The theoretician who has gone furthest in unfolding the universal reach of the commodity-form is indubitably Alfred Sohn-Rethel, one of the 'fellow-travellers' of the Frankfurt School. His fundamental thesis was that

the formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour which came into existence with it.⁸

In other words, in the structure of the commodity-form it is possible to find the transcendental subject: the commodity-form articulates in advance the anatomy, the skeleton of the Kantian transcendental subject – that is, the network of transcendental categories which constitute the a priori frame of 'objective' scientific knowledge. Herein lies the paradox of the commodity-form: it – this inner-worldly, 'pathological' (in the Kantian meaning of the word) phenomenon – offers us a key to solving the fundamental question of the theory of knowledge: objective knowledge with universal validity – how is this possible?

After a series of detailed analyses, Sohn-Rethel came to the following conclusion: the apparatus of categories presupposed, implied by the scientific procedure (that, of course, of the Newtonian science of nature), the network of notions by means of which it seizes nature, is already present in the social effectivity, already at work in the act of commodity exchange. Before thought could arrive at pure *abstraction*, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market. The exchange of commodities implies a double abstraction: the abstraction from the changeable character of the commodity during the act of exchange and the abstraction from the concrete, empirical, sensual, particular character of the commodity (in the act of exchange, the distinct, particular qualitative determination of a commodity is not taken into account; a commodity is reduced to an

8 Ibid., p. 33.

abstract entity which – irrespective of its particular nature, of its ‘use-value’ – possesses ‘the same value’ as another commodity for which it is being exchanged].

Before thought could arrive at the idea of a purely *quantitative* determination, a *sine qua non* of the modern science of nature, pure quantity was already at work in money, that commodity which renders possible the commensurability of the value of all other commodities notwithstanding their particular qualitative determination. Before physics could articulate the notion of a purely abstract *movement* going on in a geometric space, independently of all qualitative determinations of the moving objects, the social act of exchange had already realized such a ‘pure’, abstract movement which leaves totally intact the concrete-sensual properties of the object caught in movement: the transference of property. And Sohn-Rethel demonstrated the same about the relationship of substance and its accidents, about the notion of causality operative in Newtonian science – in short, about the whole network of categories of pure reason.

In this way, the transcendental subject, the support of the net of a priori categories, is confronted with the disquieting fact that it depends, in its very formal genesis, on some inner-worldly, ‘pathological’ process – a scandal, a nonsensical impossibility from the transcendental point of view, in so far as the formal-transcendental a priori is by definition independent of all positive contents: a scandal corresponding perfectly to the ‘scandalous’ character of the Freudian unconscious, which is also unbearable from the transcendental-philosophical perspective. That is to say, if we look closely at the ontological status of what Sohn-Rethel calls the ‘real abstraction’ [*das reale Abstraktion*] (that is, the act of abstraction at work in the very *effective* process of the exchange of commodities), the homology between its status and that of the unconscious, this signifying chain which persists on ‘another Scene’, is striking: *the ‘real abstraction’ is the unconscious of the transcendental subject*, the support of objective-universal scientific knowledge.

On the one hand, the ‘real abstraction’ is of course not ‘real’ in the sense of the real, effective properties of commodities as material objects:

the object-commodity does not contain 'value' in the same way as it possesses a set of particular properties determining its 'use-value' (its form, colour, taste, and so on). As Sohn-Rethel pointed out, its nature is that of a *postulate* implied by the effective act of exchange – in other words, that of a certain 'as if' [*als ob*]: during the act of exchange, individuals proceed *as if* the commodity is not submitted to physical, material exchanges; *as if* it is excluded from the natural cycle of generation and corruption; although on the level of their 'consciousness' they 'know very well' that this is not the case.

The easiest way to detect the effectivity of this postulate is to think of the way we behave towards the materiality of money: we know very well that money, like all other material objects, suffers the effects of use, that its material body changes through time, but in the social *effectivity* of the market we none the less *treat* coins as if they consist 'of an immutable substance, a substance over which time has no power, and which stands in antithetic contrast to any matter found in nature'.⁹ How tempting to recall here the formula of fetishistic disavowal: 'I know very well, but still . . .'. To the current exemplifications of this formula ('I know that Mother has not got a phallus, but still . . . [I believe she has got one]'; 'I know that Jews are people like us, but still . . . [there is something in them]') we must undoubtedly add also the variant of money: 'I know that money is a material object like others, but still . . . [it is as if it were made of a special substance over which time has no power]'.

Here we have touched a problem unsolved by Marx, that of the *material* character of money: not of the empirical, material stuff money is made of, but of the *sublimematerial*, of that other 'indestructible and immutable' body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical – this other body of money is like the corpse of the Sadeian victim which endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate. This immaterial corporality of the 'body within the body' gives us a precise definition of the sublime object, and it is in this sense only that the psychoanalytic

notion of money as a 'pre-phallic', 'anal' object is acceptable – provided that we do not forget how this postulated existence of the sublime body depends on the symbolic order: the indestructible 'body-within-the-body' exempted from the effects of wear and tear is always sustained by the guarantee of some symbolic authority:

A coin has it stamped upon its body that it is to serve as a means of exchange and not as an object of use. Its weight and metallic purity are guaranteed by the issuing authority so that, if by the wear and tear of circulation it has lost in weight, full replacement is provided. Its physical matter has visibly become a mere carrier of its social function.¹⁰

If, then, the 'real abstraction' has nothing to do with the level of 'reality', of the effective properties, of an object, it would be wrong for that reason to conceive of it as a 'thought-abstraction', as a process taking place in the 'interior' of the thinking subject: in relation to this 'interior', the abstraction appertaining to the act of exchange is in an irreducible way external, decentred – or, to quote Sohn-Rethel's concise formulation: 'The exchange abstraction *is not* thought, but it has the *form* of thought.'

Here we have one of the possible definitions of the unconscious: *the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought*, that is to say, the form of thought external to the thought itself – in short, some Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is already articulated in advance. The symbolic order is precisely such a formal order which supplements and/or disrupts the dual relationship of 'external' factual reality and 'internal' subjective experience; Sohn-Rethel is thus quite justified in his criticism of Althusser, who conceives abstraction as a process taking place entirely in the domain of knowledge and refuses for that reason the category of 'real abstraction' as the expression of an 'epistemological confusion'. The 'real abstraction' is unthinkable in the frame of the fundamental Althusserian epistemological distinction

10 Ibid., p. 59.

between the 'real object' and the 'object of knowledge' in so far as it introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought – in short: the symbolic order.

We are now able to formulate precisely the 'scandalous' nature of Sohn-Rethel's undertaking for philosophical reflection: he has confronted the closed circle of philosophical reflection with an external place where its form is already 'staged'. Philosophical reflection is thus subjected to an uncanny experience similar to the one summarized by the old oriental formula 'thou art that': there, in the external effectivity of the exchange process, is your proper place; there is the theatre in which your truth was performed before you took cognizance of it. The confrontation with this place is unbearable because philosophy as such *is defined by* its blindness to this place: it cannot take it into consideration without dissolving itself, without losing its consistency.

This does not mean, on the other hand, that everyday 'practical' consciousness, as opposed to the philosophical-theoretical one – the consciousness of the individuals partaking in the act of exchange – is not also subjected to a complementary blindness. During the act of exchange, individuals proceed as 'practical solipsists', they misrecognize the socio-synthetic function of exchange: that is the level of the 'real abstraction' as the form of socialization of private production through the medium of the market: 'What the commodity owners do in an exchange relation is practical solipsism – irrespective of what they think and say about it'.¹¹ Such a misrecognition is the *sine qua non* of the effectuation of an act of exchange – if the participants were to take note of the dimension of 'real abstraction', the 'effective' act of exchange itself would no longer be possible:

Thus, in speaking of the abstractness of exchange we must be careful not to apply the term to the consciousness of the exchange agents. They are supposed to be occupied with the use of the commodities they

¹¹ Ibid., p. 42.

see, but occupied in their imagination only. It is the action of exchange, and the action alone, that is abstract . . . the abstractness of that action cannot be noted when it happens because the consciousness of its agents is taken up with their business and with the empirical appearance of things which pertain to their use. One could say that the abstractness of their action is beyond realization by the actors because their very consciousness stands in the way. Were the abstractness to catch their minds their action would cease to be exchange and the abstraction would not arise.¹²

This misrecognition brings about the fissure of the consciousness into 'practical' and 'theoretical': the proprietor partaking in the act of exchange proceeds as a 'practical solipsist': he overlooks the universal, socio-synthetic dimension of his act, reducing it to a casual encounter of atomized individuals in the market. This 'repressed' *social* dimension of his act emerges thereupon in the form of its contrary – as universal Reason turned towards the observation of nature (the network of categories of 'pure reason' as the conceptual frame of natural sciences).

The crucial paradox of this relationship between the social effectivity of the commodity exchange and the 'consciousness' of it is that – to use again a concise formulation by Sohn-Rethel – 'this non-knowledge of the reality is part of its very essence': the social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are *not* aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality *whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants* – if we come to 'know too much', to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself.

This is probably the fundamental dimension of 'ideology': ideology is not simply a 'false consciousness', an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as 'ideological' – *'ideological' is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of*

12 Ibid., pp. 26–7.

its participants as to its essence – that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals ‘do not know what they are doing’. ‘Ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness’. Thus we have finally reached the dimension of the symptom, because one of its possible definitions would also be ‘a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject’: the subject can ‘enjoy his symptom’ only in so far as its logic escapes him – the measure of the success of its interpretation is precisely its dissolution.

The social symptom

How, then, can we define the Marxian symptom? Marx ‘invented the symptom’ (Lacan) by means of detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain ‘pathological’ imbalance which belies the universalism of the bourgeois ‘rights and duties’. This imbalance, far from announcing the ‘imperfect realization’ of these universal principles – that is, an insufficiency to be abolished by further development – functions as their constitutive moment: the ‘symptom’ is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus. In this sense, we can say that the elementary Marxian procedure of ‘criticism of ideology’ is already ‘symptomatic’: it consists in detecting a point of breakdown *heterogenous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form.

This procedure thus implies a certain logic of exception: every ideological Universal – for example freedom, equality – is ‘false’ in so far as it necessarily includes a specific case which breaks its unity, lays open its falsity. Freedom, for example: a universal notion comprising a number of species (freedom of speech and press, freedom of consciousness, freedom of commerce, political freedom, and so on) but also, by means of a structural necessity, a specific freedom (that of the worker to sell freely his own labour on the market) which subverts this universal notion. That is to say, this

freedom is the very opposite of effective freedom: by selling his labour 'freely', the worker *loses* his freedom – the real content of this free act of sale is the worker's enslavement to capital. The crucial point is, of course, that it is precisely this paradoxical freedom, the form of its opposite, which closes the circle of 'bourgeois freedoms'.

The same can also be shown for fair, equivalent exchange, this ideal of the market. When, in pre-capitalist society, the production of commodities has not yet attained universal character – that is, when it is still so-called 'natural production' which predominates – the proprietors of the means of production are still themselves producers (as a rule, at least); it is artisan production; the proprietors themselves work and sell their products on the market. At this stage of development there is no exploitation (in principle, at least – that is, if we do not consider the exploitation of apprentices, and so on); the exchange on the market is equivalent, every commodity is paid its full value. But as soon as production for the market prevails in the economic edifice of a given society, this *generalization* is necessarily accompanied by the appearance of a new, paradoxical type of commodity: the labour force, the workers who are not themselves proprietors of the means of production and who are consequently obliged to sell on the market their own labour instead of the products of their labour.

With this new commodity, the equivalent exchange becomes its own negation – the very form of exploitation, of appropriation of the surplus-value. The crucial point not to be missed here is that this negation is strictly *internal* to equivalent exchange, not its simple violation: the labour force is not 'exploited' in the sense that its full value is not remunerated; in principle at least, the exchange between labour and capital is wholly equivalent and equitable. The catch is that the labour force is a peculiar commodity, the use of which – labour itself – produces a certain surplus-value, and it is this surplus over the value of the labour force itself which is appropriated by the capitalist.

We have here again a certain ideological Universal, that of equivalent and equitable exchange, and a particular paradoxical exchange – that of

the labour force for its wages – which, precisely as an equivalent, functions as the very form of exploitation. The ‘quantitative’ development itself, the universalization of the production of commodities, brings about a new ‘quality’, the emergence of a new commodity representing the internal negation of the universal principle of equivalent exchange of commodities; in other words, *it brings about a symptom*. And in the Marxian perspective, *utopian* socialism consists in the very belief that a society is possible in which the relations of exchange are universalized and production for the market predominates, but workers themselves none the less remain proprietors of their means of production and are therefore not exploited – in short, ‘utopian’ conveys a belief in the possibility of *a universality without its symptom*, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation.

This is also the logic of the Marxian critique of Hegel, of the Hegelian notion of society as a rational totality: as soon as we try to conceive the existing social order as a rational totality, we must include in it a paradoxical element which, without ceasing to be its internal constituent, functions as its symptom – subverts the very universal rational principle of this totality. For Marx, this ‘irrational’ element of the existing society was, of course, the proletariat, ‘the unreason of reason itself’ (Marx), the point at which the Reason embodied in the existing social order encounters its own unreason.

Commodity fetishism

In his attribution of the discovery of the symptom to Marx, Lacan is, however, more distinct: he locates this discovery in the way Marx conceived the *passage* from feudalism to capitalism: ‘One has to look for the origins of the notion of symptom not in Hippocrates but in Marx, in the connection he was first to establish between capitalism and what? – the good old times, what we call the feudal times.’¹³ To grasp the logic of this passage

13 Jacques Lacan, ‘RSI’, *Omnicar?* 4, p. 106.

from feudalism to capitalism we have first to elucidate its theoretical background, the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism.

In a first approach, commodity fetishism is 'a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things'.¹⁴ The *value* of a certain commodity, which is effectively an insignia of a network of social relations between producers of diverse commodities, assumes the form of a quasi-'natural' property of another thing-commodity, money: we say that the value of a certain commodity is such-and-such amount of money. Consequently, the essential feature of commodity fetishism does not consist of the famous replacement of men with things ('a relation between men assumes the form of a relation between things'); rather, it consists of a certain misrecognition which concerns the relation between a structured network and one of its elements: what is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements.

Such a misrecognition can take place in a 'relation between things' as well as in a 'relation between men' – Marx states this explicitly apropos of the simple form of the value-expression. The commodity A can express its value only by referring itself to another commodity, B, which thus becomes its equivalent: in the value relationship, the natural form of the commodity B (its use-value, its positive, empirical properties) functions as a form of value of the commodity A; in other words, the body of B becomes for A the mirror of its value. To these reflections, Marx added the following note:

In a sort of way, it is with man as with commodities. Since he comes into the world neither with a looking-glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher, to whom 'I am I' is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man

14 Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, p. 77.

by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus homo.¹⁵

This short note anticipates in a way the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage: only by being reflected in another man – that is, in so far as this other man offers it an image of its unity – can the ego arrive at its self-identity; identity and alienation are thus strictly correlative. Marx pursues this homology: the other commodity (B) is an equivalent only in so far as A relates to it as to the form-of-appearance of its own value, only within this relationship. But the appearance – and herein lies the effect of inversion proper to fetishism – the appearance is exactly opposite: A seems to relate to B as if, for B, to be an equivalent of A would not be a ‘reflexive determination’ (Marx) of A – that is as if B would *already in itself* be the equivalent of A; the property of ‘being-an-equivalent’ appears to belong to it even outside its relation to A, on the same level as its other ‘natural’ effective properties constituting its use-value. To these reflections, Marx again added a very interesting note:

Such expressions of relations in general, called by Hegel reflex-categories, form a very curious class. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king.¹⁶

‘Being-a-king’ is an effect of the network of social relations between a ‘king’ and his ‘subjects’; but – and here is the fetishistic misrecognition – to the participants of this social bond, the relationship appears necessarily in an inverse form: they think that they are subjects giving the king royal treatment because the king is already in himself, outside the relationship to his subjects, a king; as if the determination of ‘being-a-king’ were a ‘natural’ property of the person of a king. How can one not remind oneself

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

here of the famous Lacanian affirmation that a madman who believes himself to be a king is no more mad than a king who believes himself to be a king – who, that is, identifies immediately with the mandate ‘king’?

What we have here is thus a parallel between two modes of fetishism, and the crucial question concerns the exact relationship between these two levels. That is to say, this relationship is by no means a simple homology: we cannot say that in societies in which production for the market predominates – ultimately, that is, in capitalist societies – ‘it is with man as with commodities’. Precisely the opposite is true: commodity fetishism occurs in capitalist societies, but in capitalism relations between men are definitely *not* ‘fetishized’; what we have here are relations between ‘free’ people, each following his or her proper egoistic interest. The predominant and determining form of their interrelations is not domination and servitude but a contract between free people who are equal in the eyes of the law. Its model is the market exchange: here, two subjects meet, their relation is free of all the lumber of veneration of the Master, of the Master’s patronage and care for his subjects; they meet as two persons whose activity is thoroughly determined by their egoistic interest, every one of them proceeds as a good utilitarian; the other person is for him wholly delivered of all mystical aura; all he sees in his partner is another subject who follows his interest and interests him only in so far as he possesses something – a commodity – that could satisfy some of his needs.

The two forms of fetishism are thus *incompatible*: in societies in which commodity fetishism reigns, the ‘relations between men’ are totally defetishized, while in societies in which there is fetishism in ‘relations between men’ – in pre-capitalist societies – commodity fetishism is not yet developed, because it is ‘natural’ production, not production for the market, which predominates. This fetishism in relations between men has to be called by its proper name: what we have here are, as Marx points out, ‘relations of domination and servitude’ – that is to say, precisely the relation of Lordship and Bondage in a Hegelian sense;¹⁷ and it is as if the

17 ‘Lordship’ and ‘bondage’ are the terms used in the translation we refer to (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*); following Kojève, Lacan uses ‘maître’ and ‘esclave’, which are then translated as ‘master’ and ‘slave’.

retreat of the Master in capitalism was only a *displacement*: as if the de-fetishization in the 'relations between men' was paid for by the emergence of fetishism in the 'relations between things' – by commodity fetishism. The place of fetishism has just shifted from inter-subjective relations to relations 'between things': the crucial social relations, those of production, are no longer immediately transparent in the form of the interpersonal relations of domination and servitude (of the Lord and his serfs, and so on); they disguise themselves – to use Marx's accurate formula – 'under the shape of social relations between things, between the products of labour'.

This is why one has to look for the discovery of the symptom in the way Marx conceived the passage from feudalism to capitalism. With the establishment of bourgeois society, the relations of domination and servitude are *repressed*: formally, we are apparently concerned with free subjects whose interpersonal relations are discharged of all fetishism; the repressed truth – that of the persistence of domination and servitude – emerges in a symptom which subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom, and so on. This symptom, the point of emergence of the truth about social relations, is precisely the 'social relations between things' – in contrast to feudal society, where

no matter what we may think of the parts played by the different classes of people themselves in this society, the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between things, between the products of labour.¹⁸

'Instead of appearing at all events as their own mutual relations, the social relations between individuals are disguised under the shape of social relations between things' – here we have a precise definition of the hysterical symptom, of the 'hysteria of conversion' proper to capitalism.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, p. 82.

Totalitarian laughter

Here Marx is more subversive than the majority of his contemporary critics who discard the dialectics of commodity fetishism as outdated: this dialectics can still help us to grasp the phenomenon of so-called 'totalitarianism'. Let us take as our starting point Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, precisely because there is something wrong with this book. This criticism does not apply only to its ideology, which might be called – on the model of *spaghetti* Westerns – *spaghetti* structuralism: a kind of simplified, mass-culture version of structuralist and post-structuralist ideas (there is no final reality, we all live in a world of signs referring to other signs . . .). What should bother us about this book is its basic underlying thesis: the source of totalitarianism is a dogmatic attachment to the official word: the lack of laughter, of ironic detachment. An excessive commitment to Good may in itself become the greatest Evil: real Evil is any kind of fanatical dogmatism, especially that exerted in the name of the supreme Good.

This thesis is already part of the enlightened version of religious belief itself: if we become too obsessed with the Good and with a corresponding hate for the secular, our obsession with Good may itself turn into a force of Evil, a form of destructive hatred for all that fails to correspond to our idea of Good. The real Evil is the supposedly innocent gaze which perceives in the world nothing but Evil, as in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, in which the real Evil is, of course, the gaze of the storyteller (the young governess) herself . . .

First, this idea of an obsession with (a fanatical devotion to) Good turning into Evil masks the inverse experience, which is much more disquieting: how an obsessive, fanatical attachment to Evil may in itself acquire the status of an ethical position, of a position which is not guided by our egoistical interests. Consider only Mozart's Don Giovanni at the end of the opera, when he is confronted with the following choice: if he confesses his sins, he can still achieve salvation; if he persists, he will be damned for ever. From the viewpoint of the pleasure principle, the proper thing to do would be to renounce his past, but he does not, he persists in

his Evil, although he knows that by persisting he will be damned for ever. Paradoxically, with his final choice of Evil, he acquires the status of an ethical hero – that is, of someone who is guided by fundamental principles ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ and not just by the search for pleasure or material gain.

What is really disturbing about *The Name of the Rose*, however, is the underlying belief in the liberating, anti-totalitarian force of laughter, of ironic distance. Our thesis here is almost the exact opposite of this underlying premiss of Eco’s novel: in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally. Perhaps the greatest danger for totalitarianism is people who take its ideology literally – even in Eco’s novel, poor old Jorge, the incarnation of dogmatic belief who does not laugh, is rather a tragic figure: outdated, a kind of living dead, a remnant of the past, certainly not a person representing the existing social and political powers.

What conclusion should we draw from this? Should we say that we live in a post-ideological society? Perhaps it would be better, first, to try to specify what we mean by ideology.

Cynicism as a form of ideology

The most elementary definition of ideology is probably the well-known phrase from Marx’s *Capital*: ‘*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*’ – ‘*they do not know it, but they are doing it*’. The very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive *naïveté*: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it. That is why such a ‘naïve consciousness’ can be submitted to a critical-ideological procedure. The aim of this procedure is to lead the naïve ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognize its own effective conditions, the social reality that it is distorting, and through this very act dissolve itself. In the more sophisticated versions of the critics

of ideology – that developed by the Frankfurt School, for example – it is not just a question of seeing things (that is, social reality) as they ‘really are’, of throwing away the distorting spectacles of ideology; the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence.

We find, then, the paradox of a being which can reproduce itself only in so far as it is misrecognized and overlooked: the moment we see it ‘as it really is’, this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely, it changes into another kind of reality. That is why we must avoid the simple metaphors of demasking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality. We can see why Lacan, in his seminar on *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis*, distances himself from the liberating gesture of saying finally that ‘the emperor has no clothes’. The point is, as Lacan puts it, that the emperor is naked only beneath his clothes, so if there is an unmasking gesture of psychoanalysis, it is closer to Alphonse Allais’s well-known joke, quoted by Lacan: somebody points at a woman and utters a horrified cry, ‘Look at her, what a shame, under her clothes, she is totally naked’.¹⁹

But all this is already well known: it is the classic concept of ideology as ‘false consciousness’, misrecognition of the social reality which is part of this reality itself. Our question is: Does this concept of ideology as a naive consciousness still apply to today’s world? Is it still operating today? In the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, a great bestseller in Germany, Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that ideology’s dominant mode of functioning is cynical, which renders impossible – or, more precisely, vain – the classic critical-ideological procedure. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’. Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox

of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.

We must distinguish this cynical position strictly from what Sloterdijk calls *kynicism*. Kynicism represents the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm: the classical kynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology – its solemn, grave tonality – with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the sublime *noblesse* of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation; it proceeds *ad hominem* (for example when a politician preaches the duty of patriotic sacrifice, cynicism exposes the personal gain he is making from the sacrifice of others).

Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask. This cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality – the model of cynical wisdom is to conceive probity, integrity, as a supreme form of dishonesty, and morals as a supreme form of profligacy, the truth as the most effective form of a lie. This cynicism is therefore a kind of perverted ‘negation of the negation’ of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law. As Bertolt Brecht puts it in his *Threepenny Opera*: ‘what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?’

It is clear, therefore, that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works. We can no longer subject the ideological text to ‘symptomatic reading’, confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress to organize itself, to preserve its

consistency – cynical reason takes this distance into account in advance. Is then the only issue left to us to affirm that, with the reign of cynical reason, we find ourselves in the so-called post-ideological world? Even Adorno came to this conclusion, starting from the premiss that ideology is, strictly speaking, only a system which makes a claim to the truth – that is, which is not simply a lie but a lie experienced as truth, a lie which pretends to be taken seriously. Totalitarian ideology no longer has this pretension. It is no longer meant, even by its authors, to be taken seriously – its status is just that of a means of manipulation, purely external and instrumental; its rule is secured not by its truth-value but by simple extra-ideological violence and promise of gain.

It is here, at this point, that the distinction between *symptom* and *fantasy* must be introduced in order to show how the idea that we live in a post-ideological society proceeds a little too quickly: cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself.

Ideological fantasy

If we want to grasp this dimension of fantasy, we must return to the Marxian formula ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’, and pose ourselves a very simple question: where is the place of ideological illusion, in the ‘*knowing*’ or in the ‘*doing*’ in the reality itself? At first sight, the answer seems obvious: ideological illusion lies in the ‘*knowing*’. It is a matter of a discordance between what people are effectively doing and what they think they are doing – ideology consists in the very fact that the people ‘do not know what they are really doing’, that they have a false representation of the social reality to which they belong (the distortion produced, of course, by the same reality). Let us take again the classic Marxian example of so-called commodity fetishism: money is in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations – the fact that it functions as a universal equivalent of all commodities is conditioned by its position in the texture of social relations.

But to the individuals themselves, this function of money – to be the embodiment of wealth – appears as an immediate, natural property of a thing called ‘money’, as if money is already in itself, in its immediate material reality, the embodiment of wealth. Here, we have touched upon the classic Marxist motive of ‘reification’: behind the things, the relation between things, we must detect the social relations, the relations between human subjects.

But such a reading of the Marxian formula leaves out an illusion, an error, a distortion which is already at work in the social reality itself, at the level of what the individuals are *doing*, and not only what they *think* or *know* they are doing. When individuals use money, they know very well that there is nothing magical about it – that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations. The everyday spontaneous ideology reduces money to a simple sign giving the individual possessing it a right to a certain part of the social product. So, on an everyday level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. What they ‘do not know’, what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity – in the act of commodity exchange – they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.

To make this clear, let us again take the classic Marxian motive of the speculative inversion of the relationship between the Universal and the Particular. The Universal is just a property of particular objects which really exist, but when we are victims of commodity fetishism it appears as if the concrete content of a commodity (its use-value) is an expression of its abstract universality (its exchange-value) – the abstract Universal, the Value, appears as a real Substance which successively incarnates itself in a series of concrete objects. That is the basic Marxian thesis: it is already the effective world of commodities which behaves like a Hegelian subject-substance, like a Universal going through a series of particular embodiments. Marx speaks about ‘commodity metaphysics’, about the

‘religion of everyday life’. The roots of philosophical speculative idealism are in the social reality of the world of commodities; it is this world which behaves ‘idealistically’ – or, as Marx puts it in the first chapter of the first edition of *Capital*:

This *inversion* through which what is sensible and concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of what is abstract and universal, contrary to the real state of things where the abstract and the universal count only as a property of the concrete – such an inversion is characteristic of the expression of value, and it is this inversion which, at the same time, makes the understanding of this expression so difficult. If I say: Roman law and German law are both laws, it is something which goes by itself. But if, on the contrary, I say: THE Law, this abstract thing, realizes itself in Roman law and in German law, i.e. in these concrete laws, the interconnection becomes mystical.²⁰

The question to ask again is: where is the illusion here? We must not forget that the bourgeois individual, in his everyday ideology, is definitely not a speculative Hegelian: he does not conceive the particular content as resulting from an autonomous movement of the universal Idea. He is, on the contrary, a good Anglo-Saxon nominalist, thinking that the Universal is a property of the Particular – that is, of really existing things. Value in itself does not exist, there are just individual things which, among other properties, have value. The problem is that in his practice, in his real activity, he acts as if the particular things (the commodities) were just so many embodiments of universal Value. To rephrase Marx: *He knows very well that Roman law and German law are just two kinds of law, but in his practice, he acts as if the Law itself, this abstract entity, realizes itself in Roman law and in German law.*

So now we have made a decisive step forward; we have established a new way to read the Marxian formula ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’: the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the

20 Karl Marx, *Les ‘sentiers escarpés’ de Karl Marx*, Volume I, Paris: CERF, 1977, p. 132.

side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*.

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.

It is from this standpoint that we can account for the formula of cynical reason proposed by Sloterdijk: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'. If the illusion were on the side of knowledge, then the cynical position would really be a post-ideological position, simply a position without illusions: 'they know what they are doing, and they are doing it'. But if the place of the illusion is in the reality of doing itself, then this formula can be read in quite another way: 'they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it'. For example, they know that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom.