



## **FRAGMENTATION AND FETISHISM: THE POSTMODERN IN MARX**

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In these remarks, I consider some of the consequences of a critical engagement with postmodernism for the reaffirmation of a Marxism for which conditions now seem so ripe. I begin by clarifying what is at issue in the relation between postmodernism and Marxism by defining the former and seeing how the problems posed there relate to the latter, specifically in Marx's discussion of the fetishism of commodities. I then turn to the implications of these theoretical dilemmas for how we think about politics with reference to globalization, if this term is to account not only for the mobility of capital, but also the socialization of labor. My aim is to see how we get from the critique of capital to the critique of labor and its others.

### **Introduction**

Impatience reigns when the terms postmodernism and Marxism appear side by side in discussion. A justifiable part of the unease stems from the sense that, while arguing over words, a clarity of political focus has slipped from the Left's grasp. With the destructive effects of corporate capital's grip on the direction and details of society's development receiving increasing attention in the conventional press and from quarters of the right, it would seem less controversial than it has in a long while that some version of a critique of the profit-driven market would have purchase on the public imagination. In this context, dwelling on the nuances of theoretical dispute might appear to be a deferral of politics altogether.

Like any disagreement, this one presents prospects and problems. Criticisms of Marx's work have too often suffered from illiteracy, decontextualization, aphoristic reduction, or personal attack. Marxists are left in the uncomfortable position of having to redefine the alien ground to

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which they have been relegated. Ironically, the attacks on postmodernism have often suffered the same fate, in which the connections to and dependencies on Marx have been read out of postmodernist writings by Marxists themselves, at the expense of their own influence on current theoretical discussions. It should be acknowledged that clarity of thought can be a casualty in these interludes. There is an understandable resistance to specialized vocabulary and complex sentence structure that can seem unnecessarily obscure or elitist. But also, the term postmodern, as it is used polemically, overconsolidates a range of intellectual tendencies, political impulses, and social phenomena. Calling someone a postmodernist, if they accept particular features of contemporary culture, is a bit like calling Marx a capitalist because he begins his analysis by accepting the prevalence of the commodity. As Fredric Jameson (1996) has noted, Marxism has suffered the conflation between its identification as a philosophy, a social movement, and an historical project. Yet, so too have the distinctions between postmodernist (an advocate of certain critical principles), postmodernism (a cultural logic), and postmodernity (a formation of societal development), been lost or misplaced in the rough and tumble moniker, "pomo".

When treated narrowly as an intellectual tendency, there is the further risk that debates become a kind of shadow boxing, in which a living opponent is made from a current of thought whose most theoretically productive days passed more than a decade ago. And in an ongoing intellectual climate of hostility to Marxism, the denials of reality, history, progress, totality and class, all variously attributed to postmodern belief, are likely to sound as pernicious as they are familiar. On closer inspection it frequently turns out that it is the received meaning or conventional usage of these terms that is being called into question, not the existence of a world outside our imagination of it, the prospect that things could be other than what they are, or the recognition of systematic divisions within our world. Yet when postmodernism is conceived as a radical break or total rupture with prior habits of thought and ways of life, typically lost is an appreciation of how the person theorizing this disjuncture got from one side of the divide to the other, and what intellectual debts were incurred along the way. What further complicates the assessment of these claims are the diverse political affinities among those who are designated postmodernists, a divide characterized by Hal Foster (1983) as that between a postmodernism of reaction and one of resistance. There is certainly ample room for concern if the critique of the language used to analyze social change turns to skepticism that a fundamental or comprehensive transformation of our current state of affairs is possible. The calibration and subsumption of all social intercourse to market criteria generates in its turn the view that capitalism itself is historically unsurpassable. By this reckoning, the only imaginable or desirable politics are contests over immediate conditions of existence or ground of self-understanding for a particular constituency. Greater ambitions risk reasserting the domination over others that exposed the specific arena of conflict in the first place. A quietism looms

when it is thought that the subordinated majorities must be satisfied with the small changes of local skirmishes. To the extent that such perspectives apply to present-day activism (or merely the theory of contemporary social movements, indicated, for example, by the work by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe [Laclau & Mouffe, 1985]), they reflect the price paid when the critique of capital is seen as either unilluminating or overwhelming to the understanding of how power operates or how constituencies get mobilized, and is thereby withdrawn from political conceptions.

Perhaps some reductionism and polarization in relation to what we say we are against is endemic to any effort to expose the political implications of our own thinking. If the engagement with others is also to be a process of self-clarification, what is also at stake is the use we make of Marx himself as a fundamental source for our views. Rendering Marx serviceable for the present may turn out to be a better use of energies, than ink spent on the preoccupation that otherwise well-meaning thinkers are being distracted from the most important issues. Clarifying for ourselves the uses that can be made of Marx for understanding the basis of present problems, may draw more interest than frontal and probably divisive assaults made in the name of unity (Brown & Martin, 1994). Precisely at a moment when there is an urgency that priorities be set so that a common political project can be enjoined, we may want to enlarge, not narrow, our conception of what counts as a basis for political activity, lest we be left waiting for the right politics to come to us.

### **What Was Postmodernism?**

Postmodernism and Marxism are too often presented as equals, that is, as alternative explanatory frameworks to one another. They are not equivalents. Rather, the former can be said to work within the terrain delimited by the latter, operating on questions and areas of concern that Marxism at once poses and leaves open. Postmodernism is meant to identify the conditions of contemporary cultural production when human affairs in general and the dissemination of prevailing ideas in particular, have become fully enmeshed in relations of commodity exchange. Marxism is a critique of capital, the wealth of society, seen from the perspective of capital's expansively interdependent social basis, the mutual association of labor. Hence what complicates the polarization of the two terms is the reliance of postmodernism on Marxism.

For example, in Jean Francois Lyotard's seminal formulation, postmodern culture refers to the extension of commodification to the production and valorization of knowledge, so that "Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value' " (Lyotard, 1984, p. 5). As a means or technique rather than the ends of intellectual endeavor, knowledge becomes a form of regulation and control systematized in technologies. To the extent that knowledge itself is no longer taken for granted as a

self-justifying purpose for reflection, but becomes both a factor in production and a product-for-exchange, it must also assume that responsibility for its continual legitimation. It is the contention over what knowledge is for (which Lyotard characterizes as the context of language-games) that generate what he defines as the crowning consequence of the postmodern, "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). This does not mean that comprehensive explanatory frameworks disappear, only that they need to be located in relation to one another, and their ends subjected to continual scrutiny. The incommensurability of these various accounts, the descensus in the field of explanation, becomes a resource for the continued agitation over the configuration of society and the ends to which critical knowledge is put.

Seen in a different light, as science becomes a dominant mode of understanding in society, it must increasingly assume responsibility to account for itself. Hence, generalized explanatory frameworks do not so much disappear, as become politicized, insofar as they must elaborate the conditions under which they operate and the ends they serve. Two things become apparent in the very manner that Lyotard presents his argument. One is that the postmodern is a feature of the expanded accumulation of capital into hitherto noncommodified realms of social life. The second is that, because the production of knowledge cannot be separated from its conditions of legitimation, explanation must take account of the grounds from which it makes its critique. The use of knowledge, explanatory language, cultural identification, become instruments of affiliation and differentiation among "the society of the producers" (Brown, 1986). In these two respects, Lyotard's postmodernism is also a marxism.

Yet one of the problems with discussions of postmodernism is that the term circulates without the kind of nuance that an attentive reading of Lyotard—or others—might provide. In this more general rhetorical mode, the brief that has been handed to Marxists from what might oxymoronically be called a postmodern consensus, is that intellectual frameworks that account for everything that transpires in human history, or "meta-narratives" have lost their authority of explanation. This break-up of comprehensive, universal explanatory accounts, of which Marxism is purportedly one, is a function of the fragmentation of hitherto interconnected aspects of social life. Fragmentation, in turn, is generated by the revolutionizing of all instruments of production, on the subjection of all facets of human experience to a logic of ephemerality, where what was sufficient to the demands of any given situation is good no more. While the incessant attack on "all that is solid" is unleashed by modernization itself, postmodernism embraces this condition as an affirmative value. This, at least, is the understanding of David Harvey, whose critique of the literature has been seminal to many Marxists' understanding of postmodernism.

"I begin with what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism: its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discont-

inuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity. But postmodernism responds to the fact of that in a very particular way. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change, as if that is all there is" (Harvey, 1989, p. 44).

The delineation between fact and response is not as clear as it might be, given that postmodernism is also treated here as being at once a transformative quality of social life and the attempt to account for such changes. This may engender overconfidence that the criticism of a way of thinking might somehow resist the social tendencies themselves, as if ending fragmentary thinking would put a stop to ephemerality as such. This is one point at which theory returns to resolve a problem purportedly generated by a surfeit of theoreticism.

On the other hand, if postmodernism is a mode of reflection that is also a means of activity or agency (something that generates fragmentation but could—even though it presently doesn't—also "transcend" it), then this begins to sound more like a Marxist conception of praxis than a celebration of language, representation, or textuality for its own sake. Harvey himself is keenly aware of the power of contradiction, and he invokes this as his own version of fragmentation in his closing image of "cracks in the mirror" and "internalized dialectics of thought and knowledge production" as the "sufficient conditions" for political mobilization (Harvey, 1989, p. 345). It is also interesting to note that Harvey has subsequently modified his position, and has recently sought to reconcile the value of fragmentation, now difference, with Marxism itself (see, Harvey, 1996). But in the critique of the postmodern, it is the earlier work that holds forth.

Harvey's account allows us to see that if postmodernism is treated as a theoretical doctrine, it is not logically sustainable in its own terms. For surely the claim that there are no more meta-narratives is also itself one, and the sight of fragmentation everywhere stands as a new universal. Hence we see in postmodernism the same circularity, fragmentation begetting fragmentation, that capital "sees" in itself, money making money. Given that fragmentation, as much as commodification is a problem that has confronted Marxists, it makes sense to revisit what has become a standard account of the passage from the modern to its post and then to see how the same issues are treated by Marx in his analysis of the fetish character of commodities.

To be sure, for Marxists, there is something already problematic about beginning an historical account of societal change with permutations of the term modern, which has often been used to displace the analytic primacy of capitalism itself, which is thereby converted from a socio-historical context to a narrowly economic, yet supremely causal factor. As such, a reductionism is effected that Marx would never allow, namely, the isolation of economic, political and cultural processes as if they acted independently of one another. Yet even for Max Weber, who

inspires these accounts, modernization, the generalization of the "calculating attitude" he understood as reason, was meant to explain what animated capitalism, its "spirit". The disposition to accumulate, at first good deeds in the service of a religious calling, becomes generalized throughout secular institutions and organizes them according to a definite plan whereby the very process of identifying needs is subjected to the calculus of reason. Modernity then, refers to a particular configuration of society, which is in turn to be understood in its most abstract material terms as an organization of time and space. The calculating or accumulative logic which infects all forms of human interaction, is applied to the very fabric of society and is then manifest as a heightened and incessant sense of an accelerated and forward movement of societal constitution and development.

The drive to increase turnover time and extend circulation to domains of human interaction hitherto untouched by it, is expressed in Marx's formula (emphasized by Harvey) as the annihilation of space by time. Hence, under capitalism, wealth-making activity assaults its own social basis, as existing structure, communities, environments become obsolete to a particular way of creating surplus value, or, they place demands on a portion of that surplus that it be reinvested for the purposes of social reproduction. The flight of capital is therefore an escape from the very societal foundation on which it had depended, which, once the world has been incorporated into the grasp of accumulation, means that existing configurations of spatial arrangements must be destroyed in order to make way for new opportunities. The freedom to abandon and reinvest in new terms that capital seeks as its requisite, accelerates the very process of destruction and creation, yielding the sense that space is no impediment and therefore time, or rates of change are somehow speeding up.

On this view, modernity captures how capitalism organizes social life, why it is that the accumulation process lends shape and sensibility to a determinate form of society. Modern comes from the latin *modernus* meaning, "the now". Modernity defines a procession of perpetual presents, where what exists must be destroyed to create room for the new. This account of forward moving accumulation attacking its own social base, is certainly consistent with Marx's own account in *Capital*. The presumption of forward motion, and the imagination that there exists before us some uncharted space yet to be conquered or colonized, describes the predominance of a sense of time, or temporality. Further, modernity suggests a confidence in the conditions of perpetual forward or linear motion into some new, and therefore intrinsically better condition, what we know generically as "progress".

In the face of the likes of colonialism, slavery, genocide, equating the social conditions that facilitate the accumulation of capital, with generalized human betterment, is not always an easy sell. Nor is it easy, when the "calculating attitude" demands proof that the right course has been followed, to see the world as a whole in order to recognize what occurrences are consistent with progress. One could say that, in the

face of the incessant demand to judge what history has to offer, and given the ambiguity and ambivalence that a social condition like progress introduces, upon examining that record, some of the demands to deliver the goods of societal advance are displaced into the cultural realm. Those influenced by Marx and Weber alike have been concerned that the march of accumulation would undermine the basis for human association. Habermas, for example, has held out hope that cultural values, the binding ties generated in what he terms the lifeworld (Habermas, 1982), might compensate for the loss. Marx obviously envisioned a mobilization of this enlarged domain of association on behalf of socialism. This is the logic for distinguishing between modernity and modernism, as the social and cultural front, respectively, of society.

It is within culture that the conception of the self, the bourgeois individual, is to be located, and as culture is something of a displacement from the social, the model for this idealized self—the substantive unit of identity—is not the capitalist but the artist, the quintessential self-made person, whose capacity for achievement is checked only by the depth of personal talents. The corollary to progress, in terms of modernism as an artistic movement, is formal stylistic innovation—a dazzling display of the new—which becomes axiomatic to the evaluation of esthetic output. Modernism introduces an economy into questions of cultural value (hence critical distinctions of high and low, original and copy, art and popular), while subjecting all cultural output to the demands of stylistic innovation (schools of art no less than fashions of mass music or clothing). The source of this output is the genius, a person with more talent or depth than others (it is no less required to star in painting than in the movies).

The spatial dimension of the modern is organized according to a model of depth. According to this conception, depth joins together the subjection of all space to a single bounded order (colonialism), the scale of which makes it impossible to see (hence the language of structure as invisible forces), with the depth of personality (the unconscious), which is the source of visible creative expression. This is, in other terms, a movement from external colonization of nature (and of the sovereign peoples treated as if they were mere extensions of the natural world, i.e. primitive or savages), to the command of the interior reaches of human desire. This extension of the object of colonialization is an ongoing process through which spatial relations (e.g. exterior and interior) are constituted.

Many of the most influential commentators on postmodernism (David Harvey and Fredric Jameson among them) have stuck with this privileging of individual artistic output as a way of mapping a social world that is otherwise difficult to see. Artistic output, because it condenses the vast scales of society into the visible registers of the work's material form, can be used to read the social totality. What changes in the account, is the way of evaluating (or authority) that had underwritten the distinctions of value among these various esthetic objects, a phenomenon referred to as blurring the boundaries between the high and the

popular. For anyone who has followed the prices for classic works of modern painting, or heard the calls for teaching some singular set of American values in the classroom, the idea that hierarchies of value have been eclipsed by a cultural relativism may seem misplaced. On closer inspection, one is struck by the proliferation of styles that, by some standard measure of value, fetch high prices, and the power of minorities (still underrepresented in universities, professions, and boardrooms) to be treated negatively as if *theirs* was the dominant voice.

By this reckoning, postmodernism is less the demise of the modern and its replacement by something else, than the fulfillment and universalization of modern conditions. There is an anemia that attaches to the generalized claims of progress and innovation. This has less to do with the exhaustion of the ability to create new cultural artifacts, or the declining capacity to feed or shelter people who were previously denied such necessities. If there are threats to innovation or development, these come from social disinvestment and failure of political will on the part of imperial states, not the natural limits of people to make the world habitable for themselves. Rather, the postmodern refers to the condition where the non-rationalized is no longer outside of capitalism awaiting incorporation. So to the extent that some hitherto unconquered space fueled the imagination of movement into the future, those spaces are now, in a sense, already with us. Again, this does not mean that capitalism has fulfilled the promise of progress to free us from material want. Rather just the opposite. The future as an ideological fixture is no longer a means to mortgage the present. Capital now seems directed at fleeing the universal demands of material want. To an extent unprecedented in the postwar period, scarcity now becomes the object of politics—where, by force and other demonstration effects, we are to be persuaded of the necessity of rational limits to the production and allocation of social goods. And yet these purported limits also render the tremendous amassings of wealth almost inexplicable, as if they were delivered to the lucky few by means of some alternate economy of abundance, an imaginary place where capital itself can rest peaceably. According to this logic, once capital is safe and sound, then the rest of the population can benefit from its distributions, which in turn requires wealth creation.

It is in this limited sense that postmodernism refers to a reversal within modernism itself from a predominance of time to that of space. The formula of annihilation of space by time, suggested that there was always some other dimension of space to constitute and colonize, and hence more material for the grist of accelerated accumulation. The linearity of time was always less about what could be commanded in the present than what could be promised or extrapolated into the future. When the lights of that promise or progress are dimmed, and without the secure means for temporal orientation, the characterization of the present becomes more susceptible to spatial metaphor. For now space refers to the principles of societal motion and difference in evaluative



criteria and the authority to judge that are very much on the surface, and less a distant ideal that may one day be reached. This does not mean that the fundamental conflicts that constitute history are over, but that the means to idealize the ends of history have been compromised. The skepticism and scrutiny of what lies on the surface and observation in the face of expectation, two features that comprise the scientific method, are now turned on themselves, instead of being invisibly but securely ensconced in the depths of our social imaginary. Not all critiques of science are equally serviceable for social advance, however specified. But some version of critique of science is also the condition of science, and requires more of it, not less. Between doubt and expectation lies difference, not simply a form of diversity in kind or type, but what gets thrown up in the gap between what one seeks and what one finds.

In the terms of contemporary political rhetoric, all of our futures, our demands on the present, must inhabit a space that cannot possibly meet them all. Thus, the language of all governance becomes the management of scarcity, rather than a promise to share in the bounty of the good life. The loss of confidence in the rational authority that could make these judgements today seems displaced from the cultural back to the social, as is evident in the popular attitudes toward government, at the same time that economic rationalization now appears more of a given, a universal, than ever before. Capitalism has not gone away, it has only been naturalized, or in Weber's terms "disenchanted". It can no longer hold out the recessed promise of its own future, for that has arrived or been brought to the surface, and placed in contact with what all other demands on society might be.

#### **Fetishism of Commodities and Socialization of Labor**

What is so clearly disorienting in formulations of postmodernism, beyond the obvious difficulties of language, is how to make sense of the antinomies of universal fragmentation. It is tempting to see in this process its opposite, namely, the particularization of fragmentation, where all connections to past, present and future are lost, along with the ability to act upon what is being done to us. What should be a bit more apparent from the drift of this account, is that postmodernism is an attempt to deal with a generalized condition of separating the production of value from its circulation. This does not simply mean that labor processes generate surplus value that must be realized in the market, but that the forces that draw labor together in production are in conflict with the freedom of capital to flee from the entanglements of its prior conditions of accumulation. Correlatively in the cultural aspect, meaning (or meaninglessness) appears to derive from the fact of circulation and therefore the privileging of media over "content". The signifiers or material images cut free from the immediate context in which value is produced, a familiar postmodern slogan, is only the most recent

expression of the parallels between the production of meaning per se, and political economy more broadly conceived.

As Marxists, we are, presumably, already well prepared to deal with this problem, so that postmodernism would serve as an elaboration of what Marx already knew from the perspective of concrete appearances he could not possibly already understand. As a general problem of capitalism, the disarticulation between production and circulation receives its most sustained attention in Volume II of *Capital*, but it is first and more famously asserted in Marx's discussion of the fetishism of commodities. Here too, the universe of exchange, the world of things, appears as the source of value. Yet it is not at all uncommon, in Marxist readings of these pages in Volume I, to see in them precisely the universalization of fragmentation, that seems so bedeviling in the postmodern account. It may be the case then, that to read beyond fragmentation, which we have suggested is where a critical engagement with the literature on postmodernism proves helpful, may also help us reorient our own reading of Marx. To do this requires postponing the urgency to get to politics, to which theoretical reflection sometimes seems a distraction. But because fragmentation is taken not only as bad theory, but, in the current climate, the root of bad politics, thinking our way through the problem may return us to the political quicker than we would have imagined.

Perhaps the simplest rendering of the fetish character of commodities is this: that a social relation appears as a thing. Since objects are discrete, and they appear to be the source of human social relations, the consequence of extensive commodification is that the mutual interdependence of associated producers would be experienced not as collectivity but through their apparent source, as isolated entities, a world of fragments in which life's purpose looks to be nothing more than the acquisition of things. Because these things are isolated from one another, accumulation admits of no development, only a loss. Driven to confuse human fulfillment with acquisition, life appears increasingly fragmented. Particularly if read without benefit of the discussion of universal exchange that leads up to it in Chapter One of *Capital*, fetish can be treated in this way, simply as a form of social psychology, as in the fixation upon an object. At other times, it is discussed as if capitalism itself is responsible for introducing the distinction between people and things, where the latter come to dominate the former. This can leave the impression that a society is possible unmediated by objects, whereas the significance of fetishism in the anthropological literature is that the fetish object embodies a more general social principle, as an animal or thing that names the shared quality or identity of a social group and locates this within a universe of meaning (Levi-Strauss, 1965).

In Marx, the fetishism of commodities refers not simply to an inappropriate separation between people and things, but the more general disarticulation between production and circulation that makes these two activities appear as if they were worlds apart. Unlike a social psychology, it is not the individuated encounter between a person and a

commodity that makes for the latter's fetish character. Quite the contrary, at this level, "so far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it" (Marx, 1967, p. 71). It is only universal exchange, the development of which has brought Marx to this point in his discussion, that allows his proverbial table, "so soon as it steps forward as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent" (Marx, 1967, p. 71). What makes the table able to step forward, is not of course, a property of itself, but of its context. Marx goes on, "It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was" (Marx, 1967, p. 71). This turning of the tables is not simply the dizzying reversal of master becoming slave, but a power of mastery named by its "relation to all other commodities", namely the presentation of the powers of production as such. The thing is only a fragment in and as use, but it also introduces into every instance of use, the universe of exchange, a social determination that cannot be accounted for by the thing itself, but this social principle does make the thing its token.

Under capitalism, the prevalence of a certain type of thing, commodities, both affirms and denies a social principle, "the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them", which is the "origin" of the fetishism (Marx, 1967, p. 71). Here Marx states:

"The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour-power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally, the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products" (Marx, 1967, p. 72).

Hence what is joined together to appear as a relation of products none the less represents a domain of equalization of the "life-process of society" when it is "treated as production". The "mystical veil" always hints at what is beneath it, not the truth of object or person, but of society as such (Marx, 1967, p. 80).

What we might take from Marx's analysis, then, is not the disavowal of fragmentation, but the appreciation of how to recognize something else in what is taken momentarily as a thing in itself. That something else, socialized labor, is also what brings the fragment in question into existence, the capacity not simply for production, but for the articulation of need that assumes material expression as a use value. The fungibility of need displayed in the world of products suggests both the subordination of collective laboring capacity to the requisites of circulation, and the possibility of producing on behalf of need. Marx recognizes this contradiction as the fundamental ambiguity of capitalist development that generates the conditions for a society constituted in the service of those who produce and what is needed to satisfy human want. This recognition of domination and its conditions of opposition is possible because

Marx first allows the table to appear as merely a table, before it is to become an index of something else. That is, he is willing to dwell on the sheer usefulness of the thing-in-itself before he moves on to its dimension of universality. This might describe well not only the corners of the ring that postmodernism and Marxism have been relegated to, charged to fight each other as if they were adversaries, but a particular relation of theory to politics, pinned to the same positions, one seeming to hold off the other, but at the same time locked in mutual embrace.

### **Measuring the Present**

The significance of Marx's ways of understanding bear directly on how we think about contemporary politics. If the fetishism of commodities reveals not only the subsumption of labor to capital, but the collectivization of need through mutual association, then we will have to revise our standard accounts of capitalism as only a history of progressive domination or increasingly effective mastery. Not only would this entail a simple reversal of presumptive progress, but it dims our very ability to imagine political responses, if more complete domination is all that we have to look forward to. If fragmentation and fetishism are the consequence of further commodification, there is now another term used to describe the condition of capital freed to roam the world—globalization.

Globalization has gained currency on the left and the right to describe transnational concentrations of ownership, heightened competitiveness, and diminished will on the part of governments to regulate capital flows on behalf of nationally based populations. But if globalization is only the tidal wave of capital crashing upon and receding from the shores of development, then we are back to the aggrandizement of the powers of domination without recourse to political response. One temptation is to deny the significance of globalization altogether and reaffirm that struggles over the course of development must keep the nation state in focus as an entity responsible to domestic populations, and as the arbiter of capital's mobility. From this perspective, globalization is a neologism for imperialism, and, like postmodernism, overstates what is new in the world order in a manner that renders all known forms of political engagement strange at best, and futile at worst.

It is manifestly the case that national boundaries and the populations they are meant to organize have not disappeared, and that the great bulk of the world's production and exchange transpires within countries and not between them. Yet what requires explanation, now as in the past, is how a relative minority can have such profound impact on the great majority. Why, for example, if less than a fifth of economic activity that passes through the United States is formally considered transnational (inflows or outflows of trade, or of direct foreign investment), can life as we know it be so profoundly affected in terms of governmental policies, organizational structures, and the way people

imagine themselves together as community, nation, or other means of classification?

Above all, this raises questions of measurement. We want to be careful not to accept as valid only those categories of phenomena that lend themselves to descriptive statistics. Unemployment rates are low in the United States relative to all but a few countries in the world, yet anxiety over the future security and promise of work, not simply to provide subsistence, but to anchor identity, appears to be much greater than measures of job availability would suggest. What is the evidence for this? There have been numerous polls relating to the perceptions of job security, there has been a relative florescence of attention to the issue in the media, there has been a great deal of noise and some social policy, such as workfare and job training, that has done little to provide decent jobs but much more to create a reaffirmation of the links between work and self. Yet even taken together, such indicators may prove weak measures of anxieties over the future of work in the face of globalization.

This is more complex a problem than the notorious difference between subjective and objective factors, as if what was real and what was imagined arrayed themselves neatly in columns and awaited statistical aggregation. The point is not that one should remain silent until better numbers arrive. It is always important for political discussion to avail itself of all the information at hand, and both to base decisions on competent assessment and gain fluency in the factual basis of argument to make credible interventions. Yet another burden of political discussion is to appreciate, what, beyond disputes over facts, helps generate and focus engagement and commitment. This requires the ability not only to understand inferences of existing data, but also to grasp the inferences of critical concepts, so that their use may elaborate connections and explanations that are not readily apparent, or mobilize sentiments in a more explicitly political direction.

If one speaks of joblessness or globalization as critical ideas whose referents are the principles that organize social wealth, and not simply phenomena that can be referenced by a single datum, then an elaboration of these ideas is required before one can understand how a given person acts as their agent or bearer. This is not because abstractions such as globalization operate independent of living persons, but because the principles of their operation are in contradiction, and an understanding of these tensions is required to see how people act, under what circumstances, and what can be made of their actions. To begin inductively with the concrete particular, as descriptive statistical aggregations do, can produce a rather static conception of politics where persons (subjectively) act upon (objectively) pre-given and singular interests, based upon their location, position or role.

Alternately, one can use critical concepts like postmodernism, joblessness, or globalization as markers for complex contexts that are constituted by contradictory processes. We have seen in the case of postmodernism that the model of cultural production (of knowledge, of its

narrativization, and of its practical application and reception, or circulation) carries a greater debt to Marxist concepts and contradictions than is frequently acknowledged. Let me continue this discussion with respect to the conceptualization of globalization, and then turn to the critique of labor implied by the category of joblessness.

### **The Dilemmas of Globalization**

The conception of globalization as the organization of capital mobility across or beyond national borders, whatever its degree of accuracy or utility, also presents political problems. If globalization applies to the activity of capital strictly speaking, then we have a movement from above, (and not a particularly novel one) that people at some putative base can only react to. Such a conception of globalization as something being done to us, leaves to the local the task of resistance. In this reckoning, the local organization of human activity receives an express moral authority and authenticity, presumably because it is free of the taint of the global. As an idea, the local has problems of its own. There is the evident circularity with respect to what demarcates one authentic locality from its neighbor (particularly when the boundary was designed to separate wealth from poverty). There are also the problems of the presumed autonomy of each locality to self-sufficiency, the dissociation of issues of production and distribution. Additionally, the presumption of more equitable principles of participation by virtue of smaller numbers is an idea toward which the histories of patriarchal families and village life have not always been generous. Beyond the stability of the local as an idea, is the concession of the global arena itself exclusively to the forces of domination. Such a move can produce a nostalgia for the pristine conditions of unalloyed localism that never existed, and confound efforts to recognize what, by virtue of its contradictions, presents political possibilities.

Without belittling its deleterious effects, three dimensions of globalization's promise deserve mention. The first is the direct associations of labor that result from multinational investment and outsourcing. This is significant less for the actual numbers of workers involved (the largest 500 MNC employ 26 million workers as they had 20 years ago, but they now produce seven times the output [Greider, 1997, p. 21]). What is more important is the extent to which these arrangements become the templates or references for labor processes generally. While this does not necessarily imply homogenization or the end of variation according to site, it means that organizing efforts can begin to congeal around common points of resistance world-wide, whether by appeal to working conditions, control of capital flows, corporate responsibilities, or increasingly, the failure of globally freed capital to meet social demand.

The second dimension is the apparent eclipse of industrial by finance capital. By the numbers, the value of financial transactions and debt is greater than that of fixed assets and output (Guttmann, 1994, p. 37).

This has led to a distinction between a fictitious economy of circulating bills of exchange, and that of real goods. Such distinctions seem overstated in light of the increasing integration between finance and production within the same corporation, and the heightened focus of state intervention in monetary movements as mechanisms for coordinating the movement of capital itself. Revealing here as well, is Marx's discussion of the ascendancy of finance as socializing capital, by detaching ownership from production so that decisions over the care of society's wealth are presented in their full instrumentality. No doubt, the joint stock corporation has segregated ownership and control so as to blunt assaults on managerial prerogatives, or to displace risks onto employees or small holders of stock. Yet it is the politicization of these questions of control that promises to turn concentrated wealth into a truly social asset.

The third arena, is that of consumption. This has been treated as a process of "McDonaldization" (Ritzer, 1993), whereby taste becomes homogenized and rationalized to the calculus of the market, and pursuit of privatized material satisfaction replaces politics, what Marcuse once called "repressive desublimation". Clearly, this is where the fetishism of commodities discussion is most salient. A politics of consumption would have to move beyond the moralizing insinuations of false needs (in which the true self bears many of the same features—and problems—as the notion of the local discussed above) to consider how the generalized world of objects presents the prospect of a socialization of need, where human wants enter fully into history.

This does not mean that caloric intake would cease to be a requisite of human survival, but that the labor of subsistence, which is what consumption as a generalized activity has now become (Appadurai, 1996), must be guaranteed its own conditions, (no more unpaid labor), and reconciled with the means through which needs get articulated and goods produced. The mobilization of labor in consumption now poses the prospect of planning on a world scale, not simply as a calculus for the more equitable distribution of existing capacity, but as a means to organize affiliations that cluster around those cultural practices that consumption is the occasion for. The authority for these associations would be the capacity to imagine and embody practical techniques of life-making, rather than relying on the presumed natural affinities of blood and soil that had been so powerful in framing the sensibilities and needs of human populations.

At this point, globalization demands organizational forms that foster control over socialized wealth in the service of the ability to form those human arrangements that collectively satisfy what are voiced and lived as our wants, needs, and aspirations. This politics of globalization does more than invite participation over decisions to allocate what is, but to self-consciously constitute what the material form of human association, or society, in all its internal differentiation, will be. This politics is perhaps less utopian than the dystopian disavowal that the creation of new forms and dimensions of practical affiliation among people is not

already taking place, if not presently at a world scale, then minimally, through global links opened up by that scale.

To my mind, this process needs to reclaim the name of socialism, to underscore that it is by means of what the accumulation of capital creates—the scope and the brilliant detail of life made through laboring together. Socialism is a reconversion project, from labor as means, to labor as the ends of society. This may indeed entail the end of jobs as we know them, insofar as work has been apportioned by the dictates of capital's demands, and not those of labor. The problem surely lies in how one gets there from here. One route is to ask what of that "there" is already with us. This is why it may be worth pursuing the exceptional instances of our own times that are presently manifested among professions of privilege. At the same time, one needs to be cautious as to how one generalizes from these privileged instances, so that the values that isolate or make these moments autonomous from others, not be confused with the grounds for associating labor under the sign of its own requirements, rather than those of capital's self-augmentation.

Paradoxically, unhinging labor (activity that generates use-for-others), from jobs may have the effect of increasing rather than diminishing the significance of labor for politics. For the regulation of jobs through the market has generated a relative scarcity of what labor can be applied to in relation to what it is capable of producing. It may turn out that the initial postmodern emphasis on cultural production as knowledge was too narrow, too cerebral, ascetic and disembodied to embrace all of the activity that terms like identification, consumption, pleasure, or difference are meant to invoke. Treating all of these productions as the labor that they are, may raise the familiar calls of reductionism and metaphysics that those marching under the banners of postmodernism and Marxism have grown accustomed to incanting.

Yet if the things we do to make us who we are entail uses made for others (that today are difficult to disentangle from the circuits of commodities), then labor is always a dimension of those identities named by the likes of race, gender, and sexuality, even if these last retain specific historical references and an ephemerality that cannot be so straightforwardly produced. The limits of a productionist perspective lie less with the range of activities to which some socially useful action for others upon material (i.e. labor), than the extent to which there are dispositions to desire, fantasy, imagination, or want that cannot be treated so literally or discretely as objects of a production. Conversely, that people in the world are coming to know their differences from each other through an increasingly shared matrix of classifications, constitutes an historic extension of material social relations, and not their truncation. By this reckoning, labor and its others, are, in the last instance, inseparable, though they may appear at first in a different light.

All this is not to say that now everyone can finally and happily get on with their lives through some grand theoretical synthesis or ultimate



consensus. This is an unfair characterization of any complex intellectual tendency, to say nothing of ones that have misrecognized their family resemblance. That Marxism and postmodernism have a debt to each other simply establishes some terms of transaction that presuppose that they both share some terrain, and need not stop what they are doing in order to find it. This more ample theoretical conception allows more room for politics, by enlarging the domain in which various kinds of struggle may ultimately contribute to the same ends. A theoretical understanding that makes room for what Marxism and postmodernism treat as politically significant, stands to reverse the sense that there is a scarcity of politics to confront what is so clearly in need of transformation—a society that is made by means of labor without end, and not as the ends to the vast wealth that is presently only capital's means.

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