

## Commodity Fetishism as Semblance

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### Abstract:

With the aid of Hannah Arendt's distinction between authentic and inauthentic semblances, this article reconstructs Karl Marx's notion of commodity fetishism as a phenomenological concept. It reveals two distinct interpretive moments in the fetish: the interpretation of goods as anonymous *in* exchange and the interpretation *of* commodity-exchange as natural. As authentic semblances, interpretations *in* commodity-exchange cannot be "seen through" or corrected with a shift in perspective; in contrast, as inauthentic semblances, interpretations *of* commodity-exchange can be corrected with such a shift. This reconsideration of commodity fetishism suggests phenomenology and interpretive analysis should contribute to an analysis of region and globe-defining social systems.

**Keywords:** phenomenology | Marx | Arendt | interpretation | capitalism

### Article:

And yet the possibility that it was all nothing but semblance troubled him. Semblance was an occupying force of reality, he said to himself, even the most extreme, borderline reality. It lived in people's souls and their actions, in willpower and in pain, in the way memories and priorities were ordered.

—Roberto Bolaño, 2666

To speak of semblance is to suggest a false or misleading appearance. Marx begins *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the first volume of *Capital* with a semblance that occupied him for years: "the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'" (Marx [1859] 1979:27, [1867] 1977:125). In the preface to the first German edition of *Capital*, Marx ([1867] 1977:92) advises the reader to look through the semblances of everyday life: "I do not by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests." This statement announces the relentlessly formal character of Marx's analysis. He will scrutinize exchange to discover the social relations upon which it depends: the laborer and the capitalist, who exchange freely, as well as the brute force of war, colonialism, chattel slavery, and the state. Although Marx's study of capitalism begins with semblance, it

hardly seems to interest him. By treating individuals as “personifications of economic categories,” Marx peels away the fat and sinew of meaning to reveal the skeletal form beneath.

In contrast, Hannah Arendt takes what Marx would peel away much more seriously. At the beginning of *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958:5) cautions, “[This book] deals only with the most elementary articulations of the human condition, with those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being.” Arendt (1958:5) considers the human condition “from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.” These experiences and fears are essential to an understanding of the human condition—not merely a surface to be seen through. For Arendt, an account of the human condition must engage with the meaningful substance of people’s experiences and fears. The substance is not a fetter, but a means to the apprehension of form. Thus, where Marx dispenses with semblances, Arendt dwells on them.

But perhaps the picture sketched above is misleading. What if Marx gives us the resources to grapple, in a nondeterministic manner, with substantial meaning and interpretation? And what if Arendt gives us the resources to find the formal grounds of substantial meaning? What if both, in spite of their profound differences, can guide us toward a phenomenology of social systems? To consider this possibility, I ask, what about commodity-exchange in a capitalist society would allow us to describe it as a semblance? And might this description help us learn something new from and about commodity fetishism? In *Capital*, commodity fetishism depicts the appearance of commodity-exchange in capitalist societies. It is also a satirical, mysterious concept—one more commonly addressed in the abstruse realms of social, political, and literary theory than in the workaday social sciences. Thus, if commodity fetishism can play such a role, I must demonstrate that we can do even more with the concept than Marx anticipated—a possibility that familiar readings of commodity fetishism have obscured. Reading commodity fetishism through Arendt’s conception of semblances opens up some of these previously unexplored possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

I begin with familiar accounts of commodity fetishism: cognitive error, ideological illusion, and capitalist subjectivity. These accounts yield confounding questions about interpretation that undermine empirical investigations. To address these questions, I turn to phenomenology—in particular, Arendt’s distinction between authentic and inauthentic semblances. Applied to commodity fetishism, this distinction reveals two interpretive moments: (1) the interpretation of goods as anonymous *in* exchange and (2) interpretations *of* commodity-exchange as natural. My analysis shows the secret of the commodity fetish lies as much in the banal truth of commodity-exchange as in its mysterious illusions. Furthermore, Marx and Arendt point us toward a phenomenology of social systems by distinguishing instances where, like an occupying force, semblance “lives in people’s souls and in their actions” from those where, like a shroud cast over people’s eyes, semblance lives in their perspectives on the world beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> This article offers a sympathetic reconstruction of commodity fetishism via a distinction of Arendt’s. I understand this reconstruction to be consistent with Marx’s project in *Capital*—a project I am also convinced is valid—but I cannot provide a thorough defense of that project or its validity here. The reader who remains wholly skeptical of commodity fetishism and Marx’s systematic critique of capitalism may nevertheless find here a chance to reconsider determinism, essentialism, and contingency in social theory and the possibility that phenomenology could contribute to the analysis of systems, among other matters. For recent accounts of Marx that overlap with my understanding, see Hägglund (2019) and Roberts (2017).

## Standard Accounts of Commodity Fetishism

When people define commodity fetishism, they commonly cite this passage from Marx ([1867] 1977:165): “The commodity-form, and the value relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.” Before examining Marx’s original formulation, I present the common accounts and the issues they raise. To understand the stakes, though, we must appreciate the place of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. This will make it easier to see how these common accounts—cognitive error, illusion or false consciousness, and capitalist subjectivity—leave important questions unresolved.

### Background

The section on commodity fetishism concludes the difficult first chapter of *Capital*. In the first edition of the book, this section appeared in an appendix titled “The Value-Form” (Marx [1867] 1978). But in revising the introductory chapter for the second edition, Marx arrived at the now-standard presentation. In these opening pages, he dissects the commodity into its constituent elements: use-value, exchange-value, and value (for discussions, see Elson 1979; Harvey 2010). Marx argues that the usefulness and exchangeability of commodities presuppose different forms of labor, one concrete and the other abstract. Concrete labor references the matter, toil, skills, and thought revealed in a commodity’s usefulness as an object—real, living human work that will differ qualitatively from commodity to commodity. Abstract labor references the lowest common denominator shared by all labor revealed in a commodity’s exchangeability—the average expenditure of effort over time that will differ quantitatively from commodity to commodity. Marx calls this average expenditure of effort over time *value*, or socially necessary labor time. As a purely social form, value manifests only in the exchange of commodities; it does not exist, physically, in the things exchanged.

This “labor theory of value”—a phrase Marx himself did not use—has been controversial. Marx appears to claim that value determines price and the “true” value of commodities derives not from their exchangeability but rather from the labor that makes exchange possible. Yet one will scour *Capital* in vain to find a technical account of the relationship between price (i.e., how exchange-value appears in capitalist societies) and value (i.e., socially necessary labor time) (see Wright 1981).<sup>2</sup> However, if we treat value as a heuristic—one that underscores the *relations* between commodity-exchange as it appears and the unique form that labor takes in a capitalist

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Elson advises against treating Marx’s claim that the magnitude of value “regulates” exchange-values as a statement about variable-based causation—as in the magnitude of value predicts the price of commodities (e.g., as parents’ educational attainment predicts their children’s educational attainment). Rather, she insists we understand these claims as we would one like “the molecular structure of a chemical substance regulates the representation of the substance in the form of a crystal, and the cell-structure of a living organism regulates the form of the organism’s body” (Elson 1979:167; see also Kosik [1963] 1976:31–32; Postone 1993:166–67). Considered thus, the question is one of appearance and essence, not cause and effect.

society—some of its mysteries disappear.<sup>3</sup> We need not squabble, as countless Marxists and neoclassical economists have, over the “transformation problem”—how values are turned into prices and why value and price diverge. Rather, we can take value as that which is assumed when we exchange money for commodities. If value draws our attention to the form labor assumes in capitalist exchange and production, then the question of whether Marx believes in the labor theory of value is beside the point; furthermore, that very question of belief will lead us astray.

Marx’s language in the discussion of value and commodity fetishism confounds, too. The term “fetishism,” as William Pietz (1993:131–32) notes, was derived from reports on European encounters with Africans and referred to the most primitive animistic beliefs of “savage” religions; the term itself was coined by the French philosopher Charles de Brosses. To call Europeans fetishists would have been a great insult to their conceit of civilizational superiority and enlightenment. Of course its force, for Marx, lies precisely in this racial valance: fetishists were people “outside of history” (Pietz 1993:140; see also Chin 2016:26–27). Sutherland (2008) further exposes this satirical dimension through a reading of the word *Gallerte* (translated as “congealed”). This participle describes the abstract labor that people assume as a property of commodities in capitalist exchange. *Gallerte* was also a specific commodity, like gelatin, used in jellies and jams. To refer to abstract labor, an apparent property of commodities, as *Gallerte* casts the consumer as a cannibal (Sutherland 2008:6–11). Thus, Marx’s language accentuates the biting satire at the expense of the commodity fetishist.

It is against this backdrop that we should understand commodity fetishism: a circumstance where social relations between people assume the fantastical form of relations between things. These observations (1) establish Marx’s concern with the relations that comprise and are assumed in commodity-exchange, (2) provide a conceptual grammar that reveals these relations, including the unique form labor takes in a capitalist society, and (3) remind us to attend closely to the language of commodity fetishism.

### Three Interpretive Tendencies

People tend to interpret commodity fetishism in several ways: as (1) a cognitive error, (2) an illusion or false consciousness, and (3) a capitalist subjectivity. These tendencies are not mutually exclusive, and any single account will usually combine them in some manner. Each one finds some basis in *Capital*, but together they raise perplexing questions about the nature and application of this fantastical form.

First, cognitive error. As Marx notes, the commodity fetish is fantastic or phantasmagoric and, in line with the etymology of fetishism, to emphasize error makes intuitive sense.<sup>4</sup> Some observers

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<sup>3</sup> It may be helpful to think of value as transcendental, that is, illustrating what must be the case or what is a condition of commodity-exchange. If one does this, it is necessary to bear in mind that value is historical: it refers not to all acts of exchange but to commodity-exchange in a capitalist mode of production.

<sup>4</sup> In most German editions, Marx used *phantasmagorische*, which has been translated as “fantastic.” The German term evokes lantern shows called *phantasmagoria* that involved projections of ghostly, macabre imagery. They were popular in England from the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth. In the second German edition, Marx used *gaukelspielerische*, which is difficult to translate but refers to clowns, jugglers, and illusionists proficient in sleight of hand.

simply gloss commodity fetishism as a “confusion” or “superstition” and then move on (Stillerman 2015:7–8). It is a “misapprehension” of an admittedly obscure reality (Guthman 2009:198; Pitkin 1987:270). But what is the confusion? With characteristic economy, Jon Elster (1985:96) presents fetishism as “a tendency [in capitalist societies] to overlook the implicitly relational character of certain monadic predicates.” It is a confusion about goods, which people mistake as having intrinsic value when, in fact, their value is relational. Fine and Saad-Filho (2016:23) describe fetishism as a “perspective on the capitalist world” where “money enters into consideration and everything is analysed in terms of price.” As a contribution to “psychological economics” (Elster 1985:99), commodity fetishism describes a mistake one could, in principle, rectify by shifting one’s focus from commodities to the human relations that make them possible.

A second, more complex version of the error claim appears in the focus on ideology and illusion. Here, emphasis shifts from the cognitive mistake to the social conditions that produce such mistakes. When people write of “unmasking the commodity fetish” (Zukin 2004:268; see also Lyon 2006:459; Zelizer 2011:95–96), they suggest obfuscating social conditions. Slavoj Žižek (1989:31 [italics original]) captures this well: “On an everyday level, the individuals know 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 itself.” In this vein, Daniel Miller (1987:44) claims “fetishism allows for a critical analysis of the field of consumption, but one in which the entire sphere tends to be treated as merely a ‘false’ representation, consequent of other spheres.” The illusion reflects the character of a capitalist social order.

Some scholars stress the nature of the resulting illusion. These obfuscating conditions can invest goods with alluring, spectral charms, as in Walter Benjamin’s (1999) descriptions of the Parisian arcades; as such, the fetish implies fantasy and vice. “I confess,” writes anthropologist Elizabeth Chin (2007:335), “I am a commodity fetishist. eBay has been, for months, my not-so-secret-vice” (see also Billig 1999; Duncombe 2013). The illusions of commodity fetishism become associated with the intoxicating power of goods and consumerism. Consumers are enchanted by commodities. Such a picture suggests there is something wrong with the people so enchanted (Miller 1987:206).

Other writers stress the worldly circumstances that construct the illusion, rather than its result. The fetish, as Moishe Postone (1993:61) notes, both expresses and veils the “specificity of labor” in capitalism, wherein abstract labor mediates all manner of social relations via the commodity-form. Michael Taussig (1980:23–36) explores how these mystifications “impress themselves upon consciousness” (see also Dupré 1983:49–50), and G. A. Cohen ([1978] 2000:116) writes, “In economic fetishism there is a gulf between reality and its own appearance. The mind registers the fetish. It does not . . . create it.” The fetish is a feature of “bourgeois understanding,” something produced by a bourgeois society (Pietz 1993:130). Yet the mind merely indexes the “absurdity” of a capitalist mode of production: commodities appear as self-moving beings (Andrews 2018:748–52; see also Rubin [1923] 1972:147). Analogously, Roberts (2017:85, 88) describes the commodity fetish as domination manifest in “the market-goer’s decisive sensitivity to price signals. . . . Commodity fetishism . . . is essentially a matter of practical reason, not a theoretical error.” David Harvey (2010:41) describes the fetish as a real illusion, where practical

behaviors mask social relations. The fetish resides in the world, as object and practice, and only subsequently colonizes perception.

Third, a number of readings stress the perspective of the person looking out onto a capitalist world, or capitalist subjectivity. Lukács ([1923] 1971:87) provides the definitive account of fetishism as subjectivity: “*Objectively* a world of objects and relations between things springs into being. . . . The laws governing these objects . . . confront him as invisible forces that generate their own power. . . . *Subjectively* . . . a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article.” The social conditions of commodity production render the world a thing-like automaton, as if beyond human control. Commodity fetishism describes the uncanny experience of being subject to the autonomous, lively machinations of our own thing-like creations. It also reveals the alienating separation of the laborer from her powers.

As subjectivity, the fetish is not strictly illusory.<sup>5</sup> When Ollman (1976:199) describes commodity fetishism as a “misconception,” he means that “people acquire their conception of reality from what they experience . . . and their conceptions of reality helps determine what they experience.” Amariglio and Callari (1989:39) reject notions of “false consciousness” as crassly deterministic. Instead, commodity fetishism describes the ways people construct the conditions of commodity exchange, where rational, equal, and possessive individuals meet in the marketplace (Amariglio and Callari 1989:54–56). Kevin Hetherington (2007:70) identifies commodity fetishism as “an alienated object of subjective activity that confronts the subject as a thing with image-like qualities,” that is, people’s own actions confront them in a ghostly, phantasmagorical form via the exchange of commodities. If there is an illusion here, it is no simple interpretive mistake; rather, it is a characteristic feature of experience and thought in a world where commodity-exchange reigns.

Taken together, these readings leave us with some puzzling questions about commodity fetishism. First, is commodity fetishism an example of crude economic determinism and essentialism? Or can it accommodate a plurality of interpretations and, if so, how? Second, to whom, exactly, does the fetish apply? Does it apply to all people living within a capitalist society or only to specific segments therein? If the fetish is deterministic and applies categorically, then it would seem an unlikely candidate to aid in any kind of interpretive project. But if it applies only in specific cases (e.g., liberal political economists), then we need to explain why it applies in some cases and not others.

We can resolve these questions by attending to interpretations of experience with greater care. Because existing accounts discount the process of interpretation, many overlook aspects of Marx’s own description of the fetish. Moreover, without attending to interpretation, it is easy to

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Hudis (2013:160–61; see also Dunayevskaya 1989:87–88) argues, compellingly, that Marx’s account entails a vision of freedom—a world where people feel at home among their creations, not dominated by them. By this measure, a capitalist society would be true on its own terms and false on communist ones. I agree that some comparative perspective is analytically necessary, but Hudis elides the difference between two moments in the fetish (see the Commodity Fetishism as Semblance section). Consequently, the question of what is truthful and illusory becomes less precise.

lapse into determinism and essentialism. Individuals subject to the fetish either misunderstand the world or reflect and reproduce its absurdities. They do so in a single moment of interpretation that is simply dictated by “economic” conditions—when they treat social relations between people as relations between things. It is no surprise, then, that substantive social scientific engagements with the concept are uncommon. To develop a richer approach to interpretation, I turn to phenomenology—a mode of analysis that cannot be accused of neglecting it. Such a turn is not without precedent, as there have been periodic calls to read Marx phenomenologically (Bologh 1979; Hägglund 2019; Kosík [1963] 1976; Marsh 1985).

## Phenomenology

Where Marx appears to pass over subjective experience, phenomenologists stand accused of being imprisoned by it. Bourdieu (1977:3) figures phenomenology as the subjective moment in a dialectic that yields practice theory: “the knowledge we shall call phenomenological . . . sets out to make explicit the truth of primary experience of the social world.” Such knowledge, Bourdieu (1990:26) claims, “cannot go beyond a description of what specifically characterizes ‘lived’ experience of the social world, that is, apprehension of the world as self-evident, ‘taken-for-granted.’” Similarly, Habermas (1988:113, 116) associates phenomenology with “the subjective approach in social-scientific analysis,” one that “remains within the limits of the analysis of consciousness.” “Phenomenological” is sometimes used as synonymous with subjective experience and antonymous with objective form (Ingram and Silverman 2016:758; Padgett 2018:423). But a casual elision of phenomenology and experience misses phenomenologists’ essential concern with forms that transcend and condition “lived experience.” A cursory glance at classic works cautions us against overrating lived experience itself as the *ne plus ultra* of phenomenology.

Husserl’s ([1913] 2002) pioneering work in phenomenology explored the possibility of an “eidetic science”—a study of transcendental forms that would reveal the basic structures of consciousness. In response to Husserl’s unworldly emphasis on consciousness, Heidegger pursued these transcendental questions vis-à-vis “being-in-the-world.” Heidegger’s interest was not experience as such, but its conditions and structure; these conditions—of self-consciously leading a finite life along with others in a world not of our choosing—necessarily entail subjective experience even as they point beyond it. In experience, Heidegger ([1927] 1996:219) identified a transcendent structure of care—*Dasein*. Arendt (1958) inverted Heidegger’s focus on mortality to explore the worldly conditions of natality—the possibility of initiating something new. Even when first-person experience appears as the subject and method of phenomenology, it seeks to escape the prison of subjectivity: “A good phenomenological analysis is aimed at examining and describing the nature of one’s own first-person experience in such a way that it provokes in others similar first personal self-grasping intuitions that can serve to confirm or disconfirm one’s understanding of the structures of intelligibility that govern the possibility of meaningful experience” (McMullin 2019:6). Phenomenological approaches have always been transcendental in the sense they are occupied with the conditions that make experience possible. Moreover, these conditions need not always lead into unhistorical structures of consciousness. Thus, it is misleading to insist phenomenologists must take the grounds of experience as given; rather, phenomenologists can seek such grounds through experience.

To be sure, the phenomenological concern with experience yields a special sensitivity to interpretation. Any approach that takes experience seriously recognizes, with Schutz and Luckmann (1973:4), that “the world is never a mere aggregation of colored spots, incoherent noises, or centers of cold and warmth.” In experience, the world is always already interpreted. Any phenomenological project, therefore, must clarify the relations between the things interpreted and the interpreter, as manifest in worldly appearances. We find one such account in Arendt, whose sensitivity to plurality and variation allows us to appreciate such features in Marx.

### **Arendt on Appearances**

Arendt spells out an approach to appearances at the beginning of her final work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), which focuses on the contemplative life—thinking, willing, and judging. These faculties are of the world, but they are not strictly determined by it; they are unique because such faculties “never appear, though they manifest themselves to the thinking, willing, or judging ego” (Arendt 1978:71). Yet far from dismissing appearance as inferior to contemplative life, Arendt insists on its value. In asserting the “value of the surface,” she renounces an ancient hostility, which sees in appearance only a glimpse of a more essential, truer being.<sup>6</sup> In this discussion, she introduces the notion of semblances and distinguishes authentic from inauthentic ones.

That which appears, Arendt (1978:19–22) insists, is “meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs.” Without a spectator or perceiver, appearance itself would be impossible, thus “nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular . . . plurality is the law of the earth.” As such, all sentient beings are both subject and object: others appear to them and they appear to others. The world seems to us and we seem to others. It is through these appearances that we make sense of ourselves, those others, and the world. To the extent that creatures arrive in this world equipped to make sense of it, “Being and Appearing coincide.”

On this basis, Arendt (1978:27) details what appears and how: “Since we live in an *appearing* world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface?” The biologist Adolf Portmann treated this great variety of appearances, not their concealed grounds, as the research problem. To this end, Portmann distinguished authentic from inauthentic appearances: the former manifest of their own accord, whereas the latter can manifest only by dissecting or disrupting the former (Arendt 1978:28). Yet authentic appearances may, Arendt reasons, involve choice and will. An athlete who trains day in and day out seeks to manifest “natural” skill at her sport. Whether such training succeeds or fails “depend[s] on the consistency and duration of the image . . . presented to the world” (Arendt 1978:36). In her training, this athlete attempts to influence what appears, which Arendt calls self-presentation. Thus, authentic appearances are not only those that must appear “naturally”; we may seek to “be as we wish to appear” through self-presentation (Arendt 1978:37).

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt (1978:24) mentions Marx as she describes this “two-world theory,” which is hostile to appearances: “Something quite similar seems to be true for science, and especially for modern science, which—according to an early remark of Marx’s—relies on Being and Appearing having parted company.” Marx may be less hostile to the surface than he appears (cf. Kosík [1963] 1976:7), but I do not pursue that matter here.



In an appearing world, however, things are not always what they seem:

Since choice as the decisive factor in self-presentation has to do with appearances, and since appearance has the double function of concealing some interior and revealing some “surface” . . . there is always the possibility that what appears may by disappearing turn out finally to be a mere *semblance*. Because of the gap between inside and outside, between the ground of appearance and appearance . . . there is always an element of semblance in all appearance: the ground itself does not appear. From this it does not follow that all appearances are mere semblances. Semblances are possible only in the midst of appearances; they presuppose appearance as error presupposes truth. Error is the price we pay for truth, and semblance is the price we pay for the wonders of appearance. (Arendt 1978:37–38 [italics original])

Appearances both reveal and conceal. As such, they may appear to be what they are not. This is a semblance: that which seems to be but is not. The heat radiating from the road on the distant horizon seems to be a puddle, but it is not. The moon, low on the horizon, seems to get smaller as it “ascends” in the night sky, but as a physical body it neither ascends nor diminishes in size. The grounds of these appearances do not show themselves—the material structures of our bodies, the road, the atmosphere, the moon, the earth’s rotation, light and heat. Yet these semblances may also reveal something about their grounds. The appearance of the moon on the horizon stands as a clue to the shape of the earth and its rotation. Ultimately, an appearing world necessitates dissembling appearances, or semblances.

At this point, Arendt makes a crucial distinction. Semblances, like appearances, may be authentic or inauthentic: “The latter, mirages like some Fata Morgana, will dissolve of their own accord or can be dispelled upon closer inspection; the former, on the contrary, like the movement of the sun . . . will not yield to any amount of scientific information, because that is the way the *appearance* of sun and earth inevitably *seems* to an earth-bound creature that cannot change its abode” (Arendt 1978:38). The stick that seems to bend in the water is an authentic semblance. We really do perceive it bending, even if we know it to be a trick of the light and water. However, the stick that moves of its own accord reveals itself to be not a stick, but an insect of the order Phasmatodea or a “stick-bug”; it is an inauthentic semblance. By incorporating new information, we may “see through” the semblance that previously deceived us. “To uncover the ‘true’ identity of an animal behind its adaptive temporary color,” Arendt (1978:39) cautions, “is not unlike the unmasking of the hypocrite. But what then appears . . . is not an inside self, an authentic appearance, changeless and reliable in its thereness.” One dispels a semblance not, as with a villain in an episode of *Scooby-Doo*, by removing the mask; rather, one dispels a semblance by reinterpreting the mask. Thus, there are semblances we can “see through” (inauthentic) and those we cannot (authentic). Crucially, to dispel a semblance is not to change appearances, but to change our interpretation of what appears.

For Arendt, authentic and inauthentic semblances are necessary features of the world. Things must always appear *as* something—as a table, an obstacle, an object (Heidegger [1927] 1996:139–40). By their very nature, as that which both conceals and reveals, appearances

mislead. Sometimes we can dissipate the resulting semblances by shifting interpretive frameworks, other times they will not yield.

### Commodity Fetishism as Semblance

Arendt's distinction permits us to approach commodity fetishism with new eyes, as it were. Commodity fetishism describes a situation where definite human social relations assume the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things. But previous attempts to characterize the fetish have left questions about interpretation unresolved. Is the fetish deterministic? Can it accommodate a plurality of interpretations? Does it apply to all within a capitalist society? By approaching it as a semblance, we can answer these questions. Following Arendt, if commodity fetishism is a semblance, it may be either authentic or inauthentic.<sup>7</sup> But Marx's description of commodity fetishism encompasses both an authentic semblance, the interpretation of depersonalized goods *in* commodity-exchange as anonymous, and inauthentic semblances, the interpretations *of* commodity-exchange as natural. This presents commodity fetishism as a categorical feature of a capitalist social order that, nevertheless, admits many different interpretive possibilities—it is not, in other words, merely deterministic or essentialist.

#### The Authentic Semblance of Depersonalized Goods

Marx ([1867] 1977:163 [*italics added*]) begins with a crucial observation: “A commodity at first sight *appears* an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its *analysis brings out* that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”<sup>8</sup> In the act of commodity-exchange, the commodity appears obvious and trivial. It is only analysis, a retrospective assessment, that reveals the mysteries. Consequently, commodities are both obvious and mysterious. Dazzled by the mysteries of commodities, earlier accounts have overlooked their equally significant obviousness. And if commodities are obvious, we should consider why.

What is the obviousness of the commodity-form? Certainly, the commodity is obvious as a use-value (Marx [1867] 1977:164). The person buying a table knows what to do with it. She can gather around it with others to eat, pile it high with books and papers, barricade a door with it, and whatever else the table allows. All of this makes sense to her. But Marx ([1867] 1977:165–66 [*italics added*]) suggests use-value alone does not capture this banality:

The labor of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labor of society only through the *relations which the act of exchange establishes between the*

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<sup>7</sup> Arendt discusses physical phenomena, but her distinction between authentic and inauthentic semblance need not ignore history. By reading Arendt through commodity fetishism, we can recover a phenomenology attuned to historical grounds.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews (2018:744) notes two possible meanings of appear: “It might be taken to refer to a situation of ‘seeming’ in which what appears to be the case on the surface is not really the case: ‘He appears to be hard working’ suggests at least uncertainty, perhaps scepticism, doubt that he is actually hard working. In this case, to accept appearances is a mistake, or at least may be. This contrasts with appearance in the sense of becoming visible, in which the appearance is actually also the reality of the situation: ‘He appears every day at supper time.’ In this case, to accept appearances is not to make a mistake.” This allows Andrews to dispense with some common misunderstandings of Marx's argument. Yet I think he overcorrects by abandoning the language of error entirely.

*products*, and through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labors *appear as what they are* . . . material relations between persons and social relations between things.

In a capitalist social order, the act of commodity-exchange is, at least in one sense, not a mystery at all: social relations between producers “appear as what they are.” When commodity-exchange has achieved “customary stability” (Marx [1867] 1977:167), we understand what we are doing perfectly well. We are using money to purchase something made by others that we need or want. This is why Marx ([1867] 1977:166–67) can claim that people equate different values “without being aware of it.” Where we take monetary purchase for granted, commodity-exchange is entirely obvious and trivial.

Yet there is also illusion. Marx ([1867] 1977:165) locates illusion in the situation where the products of human labors “appear as autonomous figures with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.” Commodity-exchange vests goods with an eerie liveliness: these goods, produced by human hands, appear to produce themselves. The labor is reduced to nothing but a depersonalized, gelatinous mass that makes exchange possible. When we exchange money for goods, we treat commodities as self-producing and self-valorizing; their value manifests in comparison with other commodities through the medium of money. A T-shirt costs ten dollars, which implies there can be ten dollars’ worth of labor in rice, castor oil, AR-15s, smartphones, and so on, no matter how different those various labors may be (Marx [1867] 1977:157–63). Although *in* the exchange of commodities, value appears as a social relation between things (Product X = \$10 = Product Y), we know such goods do not simply produce themselves. Therein lies one illusion. In exchange, we do and assume something that we do not otherwise believe (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002; Žižek 1989).

Next, why does this illusion arise upon reflection? “Value,” Marx ([1867] 1977:167 [italics added]) writes, “does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. *Later on*, men try to decipher the secret of their own social product.” The belated attempt to decipher the secret attests to the banality of commodity-exchange: “Reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development” (Marx [1867] 1977:168). In its “real development,” commodity-exchange is so “trivial” and “obvious” as to escape notice: “The forms which stamp products as commodities . . . already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life . . . for *in his eyes* [the one who reflects] they are immutable” (Marx [1867] 1977:168 [italics added]). Thus, the mysteries of the commodity-form are revealed upon reflection, against the course of everyday life.

When applied to commodity-exchange, the concepts of liberal political economy expose commodity-exchange’s banal strangeness: “If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver . . . as the universal equivalent, the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form” (Marx [1867] 1977:169). This describes the anonymity of commodities and labor in a capitalist social order: we cannot see, nor could we ever see, the value—socially

necessary labor time—that we nevertheless presume in each and every act of exchange. In this social order, labor must appear as value in exchange (Postone 1993:167–68). The labors that make exchange possible are necessarily depersonalized and obscured.

Thus, in a capitalist world everyone is a commodity fetishist. The commodity fetish is, at the point of exchange, an authentic semblance. The authentic semblance seems in such a way that its illusion must be perceived—it is both true and false. We treat the goods as bearers of depersonalized social labor that is, by nature, imperceptible. In other words, in exchange we interpret commodities as anonymous. To be sure, we can use Marx's ([1867] 1977:172) categories to "reveal" this depersonalized labor, yet so long as we inhabit a "society of commodity producers," only reflection will disclose this value-form. "The determination of the magnitude of value," Marx ([1867] 1977:168) writes, "is therefore a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities. Its discovery destroys the semblance of the merely accidental determination of the magnitude of the value of the products of labour, but by no means abolishes the determination's material form." There is nothing at all wrong with the fetishist's perceptual or interpretive faculties. *In* acts of exchange, which entail a "material form," no new information will make value visible. To interpellate Bolaño's prose, the fetish lives in people's actions. The only way to "see through" depersonalized goods in exchange is to abolish the value-form and, with it, the capitalist mode of production (Marx [1867] 1977:171–72).

### The Inauthentic Semblances of Liberal Thought

It is one thing to interpret depersonalized goods as anonymous in exchange; it is another to give interpretations *of* exchange. Marx claims his targets—liberal political economists—credulously interpret commodity-exchange as anonymous, or trivial and obvious. In Arendt's terms, these credulous interpretations *of* commodity-exchange as natural are inauthentic semblances that Marx seeks to dispel. After describing commodity-exchange, Marx ([1867] 1977:169) deems the categories of liberal economics, which entail such credulous interpretations, "absurd." By failing to recognize the commodity-form as an authentic semblance, these economists overlook crucial features of commodity-exchange. This oversight results in two absurd interpretations, or inauthentic semblances.

First, one may overlook the historical strangeness of capitalism. Marx ([1867] 1977:169–72) highlights this with his whirlwind tour of other forms of production: Robinson Crusoe on his island, medieval Europe, peasant agricultural production, and communist production.<sup>9</sup> No such fetish inheres in these other forms. "If . . . we make the mistake," Marx ([1867] 1977:174fn34) argues, "of treating [value] as the eternal natural form of social production, we necessarily overlook the specificity of the value-form, and consequently of the commodity-form together with its further developments, the money form, the capital form, etc." A capitalist social order is strange not only because of the ghostly mysteries it engenders, but because it is a historical oddity—one that nevertheless manages to assert itself as natural.

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<sup>9</sup> Marx ([1867] 1977:170) skewers the European conceit of enlightenment further by suggesting that people in feudal Europe, "shrouded in darkness," had a clearer account of the social relations of production and exchange than does the contemporary European. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for insisting on this point.

Second, one may overlook the banal strangeness of the commodity-form itself. Marx ([1867] 1977:176) dismisses debates over the role that nature plays in exchange-value, for instance, by pointing out that participants have been “misled by the fetishism attached to the world of commodities, or by the objective appearance of the social characteristics of labour.” This objective appearance is an authentic semblance. Moreover, the authentic semblance nurtures an inauthentic semblance—a debate about nature and exchange-value. To Marx, such a debate is a banal absurdity. In the final passages, he unearths another absurdity that results when one takes the commodity-form for granted. An anonymous tract on political economy and the eminent Samuel Bailey both attribute value to things and use-value to people. Marx’s ([1867] 1977:177) rejoinder lays the absurdity bare:

So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay a special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realized without exchange, i.e. in the direct relation between the thing and man, while, inversely, its value is realized only in exchange, i.e. in a social process.

The commodity’s curious depersonalization *in* exchange, which I characterize as an authentic semblance, again abets an inauthentic semblance—a belief that value belongs to commodities, while use-value does not.

### Two Interpretive Moments in Commodity Fetishism

Ultimately, commodity fetishism involves two interpretive moments: the authentic semblance of depersonalized goods *in* exchange and inauthentic semblances, or interpretations *of* exchange as natural. The fetish, therefore, lies in commodity-exchange as it seems to us and informs our reflections on exchange, especially when we take this seeming for granted. But these two moments are distinct; to interpret goods as anonymous *in* exchange does not, strictly, determine interpretations *of* exchange. Otherwise, it would be impossible for anyone who buys or sells goods in a capitalist society to arrive at any interpretation but those of the liberal political economists. As such, *in* exchange everyone may be a fetishist, but we need not necessarily share the exact same fetishistic interpretations *of* commodity-exchange.

Having secured a more robust approach to interpretation, the illusory nature of commodity fetishism becomes at once simpler and more intricate. First, there is nothing technically illusory about the interpretation of goods *in* commodity-exchange as anonymous. One who interprets goods as anonymous does so accurately. Second, the interpretation of goods as anonymous becomes illusory once the perceivers take depersonalized goods for granted in their interpretation *of* commodity-exchange. The fetish is strange, therefore, because its mysteries hail from such a banal source—one properly, not errantly, perceived. If capitalist exchange were transparently strange, then strange thoughts would simply and obviously reflect this strangeness. However, because this strangeness manifests upon reflection, something trivial and obvious becomes

strange and mysterious. This inversion heightens the uncanny sense that our lives are dominated by semblance.<sup>10</sup>

These interpretations *in* and *of* commodity-exchange depend on a capitalist social order. The interpretation of goods as anonymous in commodity-exchange points to historically-specific features of a capitalist society, like the expansion of the commodity-form. Without these grounds, such interpretations would look very different. Furthermore, because interpretations *of* involve reflections on commodity-exchange, we would expect to see variations in the character of these reflections. The space between practical exchange and reflections on it invites more elaborate renderings of exchange and what it means. This may create opportunities for idiosyncratic or particular concerns to shape interpretations *of* commodity-exchange. As Marx admits, there are multiple ways to overlook crucial features of commodity-exchange. Thus, Marx enables a more pluralistic, far less deterministic approach to interpretation than many assume.

### **Toward a Phenomenology of Social Systems**

By reading Marx's account of commodity fetishism through Arendt's categories of semblance, we can appreciate how commodity fetishism points toward a historically grounded systemic phenomenology, and how Arendt's phenomenology points toward an analysis of social systems. In the fetishism of commodities and the distinction between authentic and inauthentic semblance, we find tools with which to reason from the data of experience to the systemic ordering of the world. Although they begin in different places, both Marx and Arendt scrutinize the data of experience to discover clues about this systemic ordering. The ground may not reveal itself, as Arendt says, but the semblance can reveal something about its ground. Marx argues that commodity-exchange misled political economists, who naively followed the path from experience to arrive at falsely transhistorical principles of political economy. At the same time, he insists that commodity-exchange indexes the historically unique productive conditions and principles of a capitalist social order. Thus, commodity-exchange does reveal something about its ground. We can show this by distinguishing authentic from inauthentic semblances and considering the interpretations associated with them. This suggests at least three crucial issues for a phenomenology that can contribute to the study of social systems: (1) the social status of interpretations, (2) surface and depth, and (3) contingency in interpretation.

Both Marx and Arendt reason from first-person interpretations—of semblances and of commodity-exchange—back to their conditions of possibility. With respect to commodity fetishism, what is the appropriate way to characterize interpretations *in* and *of* commodity-exchange? Are they first-person, collective, or necessarily hybrid? What do collective and first-person interpretations entail? How, exactly, are first-person and collective interpretations social? It is also worth asking how first-person interpretations relate to collective interpretations. In other words, to ensure empirical accuracy and logical precision, the analyst must not assume (1) the manner in which either first-person or collective interpretations are social or (2) the nature of the relationship between them. Moreover, the analyst must consider whether one can use the same

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<sup>10</sup> See Roberts (2017:82–94) for a helpful discussion of fetishism and domination.

mode of reasoning—from interpretations to their grounds—when dealing with collective versus first-person interpretations.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between authentic and inauthentic semblance indicates that some phenomena may be more readily “seen through” or reinterpreted than others. Attending to this distinction will be crucial to the development of reasonable arguments about the systemic grounds of everyday interpretations (cf. Ollman 2003:118–19). It also offers an opportunity to rethink metaphors of surface and depth in social theory. Marx’s account of commodity fetishism suggests authentic semblances may, in some ways, condition inauthentic semblances. But rather than simply dismiss interpretations of semblances as faulty or derivative of some deep structure, we can inspect them for clues as to their grounds. We must be able to address circumstances where the appearance of the social world can deceive—that is, the semblance persists in spite of any knowledge gained. This will allow us to clarify when semblances may be reliable guides to their systemic grounds: how the “surface” can reveal something accurate about the “depths.” Because commodity fetishism is, in part, an authentic semblance, the analyst can establish connections between interpretations and their grounds without denouncing the interpreter as simply delusional and the surface as mere appearance. After all, goods really do seem to possess value. This seeming offers a clue to the unique features of labor in a capitalist system.

Finally, we should consider what plurality or variations in interpretation reveal. Do they indicate relatively contingent processes or are they wholly explicable in terms of more general social logics? Taking commodity fetishism as an example, would plurality in interpretations *of* exchange express or depart from a logic consistent with a capitalist social order? In Skotnicki (forthcoming), I examine how interpretations *in* and *of* commodity-exchange inform the development of consumer sympathy—a humanitarian sentiment that some might view as disrupting, or at the very least departing from, a capitalist logic. Because consumer sympathy develops through commodity-exchange, apparent variations in interpretations *of* would be entirely consistent with a capitalist logic and therefore not, at least in this sense, contingent. Yet the substance of particular variations in consumer sympathy could be contingent. It is worth investigating the processes through which variations in interpretation arise and when “contingent” is an appropriate description.

The distinction between authentic and inauthentic semblances permits us to take interpretations of experience seriously even as we work through them to their systemic conditions of possibility. Arendt (1978:39) surmised this would have sweeping epistemological consequences: “That natural and inevitable semblances are inherent in a world of appearances . . . is perhaps the strongest, certainly the most plausible, argument against the simple-minded positivism that believes it has found a firm ground of certainty if it only excludes all mental phenomena from consideration and holds fast to observable facts, the everyday reality given to our senses” (see also Kosík [1963] 1976:10–14). Arendt argues against positivist empiricism, but my point must

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<sup>11</sup> I suspect there are many circumstances where the reasoning will be analogous. Consider Dingxin Zhao’s account of student mobilization and campus ecology in the Beijing prodemocracy movement. Zhao (1998:1505) notes that the arrangement of student dormitories facilitated common patterns of mobilization but did not strictly dictate student interpretations of their circumstances: “Students seldom simply agreed with each other. However, continuing discussion of similar issues, which were often social problems with no easy solutions, made students more sensitive to these issues, and gradually they came to some consensus on a few basic points.” In this account, Zhao reasons from collective interpretations to their ecological grounds.

be more modest: we should not shy away from studying interpretations as systemic phenomena. Marx and Arendt illustrate that the study of semblances and their grounds can disclose formal aspects of the social world. Authentic semblances, like the interpretation of goods as anonymous *in* exchange, live in people's souls and actions. Inauthentic semblances, like the interpretations *of* commodity-exchange, live in the accounts people give of those souls and actions. Scholars who study interpretation can discover such lineaments and specify their relevance to social systems like capitalism. It is an opportunity well-worth exploring.

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