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Capital
Value & Translation

Pranab Kanti Basu
&
Jon Solomon

2018

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Commodity Fetishism

Pranab Kanti Basu¹ *

The Method of Marx

In this centenary year of the publication of *Capital Vol. I (C 1)*, it is appropriate that we recognize the iconic value of this work. At the same time it is necessary to re-read or reconstruct *Capital* not just to make it up-to-date, but also to rethink a lot of the orthodox interpretations of processes delineated in *Capital*. This is above all a political necessity. We believe that with the increasing hegemonic character of the interpellated subjectivity of the individual it is necessary to go to the depth of many of the concepts inaugurated by Marx to uncover the possibilities of a critique of the subjectivities that are the unconscious product of the capitalist order.

We subscribe to the readings that ascribe the logic of overdetermination (OD) to Marxian analysis. Althusser first indicated that this OD logic of Marx marked his distance from Hegel's dialectics and, he contended, it was never simply a matter of putting matter in place of spirit. We have a disagreement with the reading by Althusser at this moment: materiality itself is overdetermined and contradictory, so the displacement of idea by matter² itself implies a different logic process. There are important political implications of the dethroning of the dialectics of Hegel as a constituent of dialectical materialism that Althusser has elaborated in different places. As we elaborate the departure of Marxian OD logic through the problem of Commodity Fetishism (CF) we will simultaneously show the role of *interpellation* and so of the need of intertwining cultural counter hegemonic strategies with the political counter hegemonic practices of those organising to affect social change.

Let us listen to Althusser for the difference between the two methods: “a Hegelian contradiction is never *really overdetermined*, even though it frequently has all the appearances of being so... Hegel... argues that every consciousness has a suppressed-conserved (*aufgehoben*) *past* even in its present, and *a world* (the world whose consciousness it could be, but which is marginal in the *Phenomenology*, its presence virtual and latent), and that therefore it also has as its past *the worlds of its superseded essences*. But these past *images* of consciousness and these latent *worlds* (corresponding to the images) never affect present consciousness as *effective determinations different from itself*: these images and worlds concern it only *as echoes* (memories, phantoms of its historicity) of what it has become, that is, *as anticipations of or allusions to itself...A circle of circles, consciousness has only one centre*, which solely determines it; it would need, *circles with another centre than itself -- decentred circles --* for it to be affected at its centre by their effectivity, in short for its essence to be over-determined by them” (Althusser, 1969).

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Commodity Fetishism: the Dual Character of Commodities

Marx had abiding interest in the process of structural concealment of class rule (hegemony) in the capital-commodity order. This led to interest in the idea of the fetish: the attribution of supernatural abilities to inanimate objects like idols, charms, etc. i.e. in the appearance of power where it is not. This inevitably took the route of a critique of religion, which is an area where the fetish plays a crucial role.

The idea of religion as fetish was developed by a contemporary, Feuerbach. Feuerbach's interpretation was that individuals or the 'earthly family' projects its best or *alienates* its goodness to image god or the 'holy family', which then appears to determine the earthly family's fate. In Thesis IV on Feuerbach, Marx critiques his position. Feuerbach theorized the genesis of the religious world as the product of projection of secular traits of man. This was based on his conception of man as ahistorical individual as opposed to *social man* – a distinction Marx highlights in thesis VI. To Marx the problem is to locate the contradictions and conflicts in real society that impels man to religious self-alienation and to practice to remove this cause (class exploitation, consequent subjectivities). Unlike Feuerbach, this was not a one sided criticism of idealism or spiritualism intended to show the 'falsity' of religious beliefs. Marx's materialism argues that all so called false notions emerge from material contradictions and so are real.

In Marxian analysis commodity fetishism (CF), like every fetish that he discusses, is constituted by the twin social phenomena of *alienation* and *reification*. In religion: class contradictions tear apart the earthly family: alienation of humanity from itself. The lost unity is projected outward to the holy family, reified in idols, rituals, etc.

Let us consider CF. Social division of labour requires allocation of labour into different activities. In direct allocation (command and consent) the concreteness of the labours performed are realised as such. I am not alienated from what I produce. In indirect allocation working through the market I produce to sell. I am alienated from my product. Marx remarks that the product has no use value to the producer/seller but only exchange value. To the buyer it has use value. The ultimate form of this alienation occurs when labour power has become a commodity. Man is alienated from his own labour.

Though Marx starts his analysis of commodities assuming petty production, he remarks later "[T]he *economic categories*, already discussed by us [in discussing PPE], *bear the stamp of history*. Definite *historical conditions* are necessary that a product may become a commodity. It must not be produced as the immediate means of subsistence of the producer himself. Had we gone further, and inquired under what circumstances all, or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we should have found that this can only happen with production of a very specific kind, capitalist production" (C1, 118, emphasis added).

The alienation of man from his labour is the result of a historical process that involves dispossession/accumulation, etc. giving birth to capitalism. CF is the result of political, cultural, economic processes that led to the interpellation of individual as subject through the violent processes of birth and sustenance of capitalism.

This interpellation is based on the reduction of social relations marked by *difference* (that include social division of labour but also the underlying class and other antagonistic processes) into the *sameness* of 'individuals' and the reification of an illusory *sameness* in the *quantitative* relations between the fruits of alienated labour – commodities. The notion of the individual (equality, harmony) is grounded in this reification.

Let us read Marx on the meaning and genesis of CF.

There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the *fantastic* form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (C 1, 47, emphasis added).

It arises, therefore, from the very concept of exchange. Through exchange two qualitatively different commodities (i.e. goods that are bought and sold) are treated as comparable. What was the material, as historical, basis of the *emergence* of this particular problem – quantitative equalisation of unequal qualities? Say, two shirts exchange for a chair. You sold the table because you had produced it but did not need it and because you needed the shirts and did not produce them. Converse is true for the buyer of table and seller of shirt. So there must be a developed *social division of labour*. Some people specialise in the production of this thing and some others in the production of that thing. But this too is not sufficient ground for exchange. “This division of labour is a necessary condition for the production of commodities, but it does not follow, conversely, that the production of commodities is a necessary condition for the division of labour” (C 1, 30). *Exchange is a particular solution to the need for economic interaction caused by social division of labour*. Social division of labour among the members of a society demands economic interaction. But this does not have to take the form of exchange. For one, the producers may not be free to exchange. The lord may take their produce and distribute some of it at will among the producers and enrich himself with the rest. Alternately, there could be common rights over all products, which may then be distributed according to some community norms.

So, exchange is a particular solution to the problem of allocation of social labour or the problem of social division of labour. With the emergence of exchange as the dominant motive of production, the problem of social division of labour is solved through the quantitative equalisation of commodities that are, obviously, of different qualities. What is the analytic/philosophic explanation/connotation of this solution? We will examine the analysis offered by Hegel and see that it is simply reflected in neoclassical economics. We will then examine the analysis offered by Marx; establish its difference from Hegelian logic and see the conceptual role of CF in this context.

Let us state at the outset our basic proposition regarding the two approaches to the process of quantitative equalisation of qualitative differences – in Hegel and in Marx. The process of equalisation in Hegel as well as in neoclassical economics starts from the premise of individual. In Hegel the essence of the individual is free will from which through deductive triadic logic he arrives at the concept of *abstract utility*. In neoclassical economics the point of departure is *homo economicus* who is a maximiser of *abstract utility*. In either case the process of equalisation becomes self referential, bereft of the pulls, pushes and violence of social relations. The reduction of qualitative difference to quantitative equality is attributed to the eternal *nature* of man. *This way of looking at the resolution of the conflict between qualitative difference and quantitative comparison is itself a product of CF – the thinking of the contradiction by an individual interpellated by capital-commodity order*. In Marx, in contrast, the premise is capitalist commodity production³ and is, hence, shot through and through with the contradictions of the capitalist order. It is based on a critical assessment of the order from the outside. In the former, therefore, the question of interpellation cannot be situated; in the latter it

assumes central significance. In the Hegelian and neoclassical world, therefore, the veil of “magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities” cannot be lifted while this becomes the central objective of Marx’s analysis of commodities.

Hegel’s (and Neoclassical Economics’) Resolution of the Duality

We start from Hegel. Hegel deals with the analytics of exchange in his *Philosophy of Right*.

The *thesis* is *pure free will*⁴. The *anti-thesis* or *negation* of free will is *pure externality*⁵. The *synthesis* or the *negation of negation* is *property* - “A person has the right to direct his will upon any object, as his real and positive end. The object thus becomes his. As it has no end in itself, it receives its meaning and soul from his will. Mankind has the absolute right to appropriate all that is a thing” (Para 44). Thus, through the triadic dialectics of Hegel from pure free will, through pure externality, we reach the first generality – property. It is to be noticed that the lower moments (purely subjective free will, pure externality, etc.) are only partial in themselves and attain their sufficiency in the higher generality (property), which thus absorbs them totally. They are *sublimated* and become just lower moments of the universal.

But the journey does not end here. And we are particularly interested in the next sublimation because of its contrast with Marx’s analysis of the same journey: the journey to contract and exchange. The objectification of free will in own property is still purely subjective i.e. recognized only by the individual property owner, self.

The *thesis* in this second sublimation is *my property*. It does not exist unless it is recognized by another free will. It must be ‘unowned’. This is the negation or *anti-thesis*. Unowning my property means giving it up to gain ownership of another’s property – the act of exchange⁶. The other’s will is manifest only in the *other’s property* that the other, too, must unown for the other’s will to be recognized. This simultaneous ‘unowning’ is exchange based on contract⁷. So freedom of will is realized/recognized when we treat each other’s wills as free through contract. In *contract* occurs the *synthesis*. It is the realization of a common will in contract that lifts up and absorbs (sublimates) the wills of the two. This is yet not the true universal because exchange is an accidental occurrence (we may say that it occurs when there is mutually consistent demand-supply). We will not go into the development of the true or necessary universal through morality, ethics and state. At this juncture Hegel offers his solution to the problem of exchange or the problem of quantitative equalization of qualitatively different things, and this is topical to us.

Consciousness starts from awareness of differences in (concrete) use values. At the moment of entering the act of exchange individual is indifferent about the concrete uses; the difference (thesis) and indifference (antithesis) is sublimated in the notion of abstract utilities, which Hegel calls ‘want’. “[Q]uality here becomes quantity”⁸. ‘Want’ is clearly what the neoclassical economists were to later call utility or what should, more appropriately, be called *abstract* utility i.e. utility that is not specific to each concrete commodity but is utility in general, say, the utility signified by the utility function of an individual in neoclassical economics. The price ratios are therefore determined in both Hegel’s scheme as well as in the scheme of the neoclassical economists by the ratio of abstract utilities that can be derived from the consumption of unit commodities. We need not go into the technicalities here. Hegel’s ‘value’ or the abstract utility of a unit of a commodity is entirely one’s personal evaluation. This makes utility private and hence not communicable. This is exactly what the neoclassicals too admit in saying that interpersonal comparison is not possible. This cloisters

mainstream economics from social tension. Neoclassical economics encloses ‘individuals’ in glass bubbles through its entry point of ahistorical *homo economicus*. There is only an apparent difference between the analysis of exchange offered by Hegel and that offered by the neoclassical economists. The difference appears in the initial point of departure: while for Hegel it is pure, free will, in neoclassical economics it is *homo economicus*. But individual defined by free will and individual defined as *homo economicus*, are both only self referential – bereft of social history and so of any kind of tension, constituted only by their eternal nature. In the case of Hegel abstract utility is the result of a process, in neoclassical economics it is the premise. In either case, however, the exchange ratios or relative prices are derived as ratio of abstract utilities of unit commodities exchanged.

Let us also remark here on the method of abstraction “[q]uality here becomes quantity ...[want] in its progress starts from the special quality of an object, passes through indifference with regard to the quality, and finally reaches quantity.” The process of Hegelian sublimation is succinctly stated. There is no residual of the specificity or concreteness of the commodity as quality (use value to Marx) is totally subsumed in quantity (abstract utility).

Marx’s Solution

Let us examine Marx’s approach to the same problem – quantitative equalisation of qualitative differences of commodities.

Capital Vol. I (C1) begins thus: “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity” (C1, 26).

We have to be a bit more specific: we have to indicate the organisational form under which these commodities are produced. “The mode of production in which the *product takes the form of a commodity*, or is produced directly for exchange, *is the most general and most embryonic form of bourgeois production*” (C1, 51, emphasis added). The product, not the labour power used in production, takes the form of commodities. The commodities are produced by what are termed ‘petty producers’ with own tools and with own or family labour. Importantly, they do not employ wage labour. This is like the cottage industry. This mode of production has also been called ‘Simple Commodity Production’ (SCP).

In this economy the problem posed by existence of social division of labour, which we have already mentioned, is resolved through exchange. It is necessary that the simple commodity producers independently take their decisions. A host of cultural changes and changes in psyche or subjectivity are necessary for this to be feasible⁹.

Commodities are whatever is exchanged in the market. Exchange cannot take place without prices. Relative prices are simply the ratios that equate qualitatively different things quantitatively. So exchange values enter the discussion. Marx argues that since prices are common to all commodities they must be explained by something else that is also common to all commodities. What is this common something? There are two other attributes that are common to all commodities: one, they have use values or are useful things; two, they are products of labour. So prices must be explained by either of these attributes. But they cannot be explained by their utilities because “As use values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities, but as exchange values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use value” (C1, 27). So prices must be explained by the labour expended in their production. But when we reject use values as possible

determinant of exchange values or prices “[a]long with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we *put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them*, and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract” (Ibid, emphasis added).

We should point out that the use values that Marx is referring to are the *concrete* use values (the specific uses of things), to be differentiated from the *abstract* utility that Hegel talks of and which neoclassical analysis uses. The fact that neoclassical economics proposes utility as determinant of prices is not per se open to the criticism of being illogical. Because, as Marx mentions in the quote, if we rule out concrete utilities as determinants of prices, we also have to rule out concrete labour, which can be measured in clock hours. If one abstraction (abstract labour) can be used it is perfectly logical to use some other abstraction (abstract utility). The point is that there is a choice involved and this has cultural-political connotations. The choice is between matter and idea/spirit i.e. pure subjectivity. As we pointed out in our initial statement of intent, this choice involves also a displacement of logical method. This takes us back to the question of OD of the various processes that Marxism announces or reaffirms and neoclassical economics, among so many other theories, suppresses. Without suggesting any other concrete possibilities we can say that *logically* there could be other abstractions apart from abstract utility and abstract labour. In any case, abstract utility was always an available choice. One of the reasons for Marx’s inclination towards abstract labour was, as Gibson-Graham points out¹⁰, the prevailing atmosphere supportive of humanism. In fact, political economists like Ricardo and Smith attributed the wealth of the nation to the labour of the producers. There was probably a more important reason for the choice of the abstract substance as labour. We know now that what we have is just the truth effect, not *the truth*. This is where political and cultural processes intersect, though not always in a conspiratorial sense. The political objective of Marx was to show the source of exploitation, to motivate action against exploitation, which he defined as the appropriation of surplus labour performed by the working classes. This reinforced the choice of the abstract unit as labour. The apparently logical justification that Marx provides in *Capital I* for the exclusion of use values as determinant of exchange values is only polemical: we have already pointed out that if abstract labour can be the source of exchange value so can abstract utility.

To understand the speciality of commodity exchange let us read Marx: “It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility... From this moment the labour of the individual producer acquires socially a twofold character. On the one hand, it must, as a definite useful kind of labour, satisfy a definite social want, and thus hold its place as part and parcel of the collective labour of all, as a branch of a social division of labour that has sprung up spontaneously. On the other hand, it can satisfy the manifold wants of the individual producer himself, only in so far as the mutual exchangeability of all kinds of useful private labour is an established social fact, and therefore the private useful labour of each producer ranks on equality with that of all others... The twofold social character of the labour of the individual appears to him, when reflected in his brain, only under those forms which are impressed upon that labour in every-day practice by the exchange of products” (C1, 47-48).

Let us read the texts a bit closely. Marx, as we have already seen, talks of “put[ting] *out of sight* ... the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them [commodities]”; he also talks of “The *twofold social character* of the labour”. Let us contrast this with what Hegel says “Value is the *true essence* or substance of the object, and the object by possessing value becomes an object for consciousness... Quality here *becomes* quantity”. Quality, in the Hegelian analysis, is absorbed/sublimated in quantity – use value in abstract utility. In neoclassical economics, the process

of this sublation is implicit. It has already been done in the production of *homo economicus* who is constantly comparing the utility losses and benefits from various decisions and maximising his/her abstract utility subject to a *quantitative* constraint. These abstract utilities (neoclassical economics) or abstract wants (Hegel) that are synonymous are purely individual, self referential. That is why neoclassical economics rules out inter-personal utility comparisons. “In this neoclassical theoretical construct, a property is chosen – to serve as a standard for the measurement of equality in exchange – which is contained within the relationship of one human being, or of a group of human beings (e.g., a household), to nature and which thus preserves the individuality of these human beings” (Amaraglio and Callari: 48).

Marx, on the other hand, as we have remarked, talks of just putting the concrete aspect of commodities and hence of concrete labour *out of sight*. He also talks of the two fold character of labour. Thus there is no work of sublimation. Hegelian dialectics is not used. The qualitative and quantitative aspects of commodities and, hence, of labour continue to exist, the problem is then one of repression (putting out of sight) of the qualitative aspect. As Amaraglio and Callari elaborate: “The theoretical problem that *Capital* presents is the resolution of this (theoretically posed) contradiction [between concrete and abstract labour]...Commodity fetishism, then, summarizes the qualities of individuals that transform the unequal exchange of actual labor times into an exchange of equivalents...It was in order to provide a resolution to this contradiction that Marx developed the concept of commodity fetishism. A resolution of the contradiction that affirms the existence of individuals must theorize the possibilities for a transformation of trade (of unequal quantities of actual labor times) into exchange (of equivalents). Such a transformation is possible only on the condition that the object of exchange not be, and not be conceived as, actual labor time. Equality of exchange can be theorized only by reference to a property of the objects of trade other than actual labor times. *It is possible to define this property in a variety of ways, each of which signifies particular, hence, different forms of consciousness and agency*” (Amaraglio and Callari, emphasis added). We have already seen that this property is defined as abstract utility by Hegel and the neoclassical economists and as abstract labour by Marx.

The resolution of the problem involves, then, the historical analysis of interpellation constituting and constituted by the capitalist order. CF is a significant aspect of subjectivity formation in the age of capital. To make a bold statement: the problem of quantitative equalisation of qualitative differences is posed and answered within the Hegelian and neoclassical approaches through paradigms constituted by the subjectivity interpellated by the commodity order; Marx looks at the problem from a vantage point outside the order; he problematises this interpellation itself. This is one way of understanding why mainstream economics sees the present as the ‘end of history’ and Marxists dream of a journey into the future.

But did Marx not begin his analysis of commodities from the SCP economy? And does he not mark CF as a necessary closure of exchange within the SCP economy? So where does the interpellation of subjectivity constituting and constituted by the *capitalist* order come?

To Marx the equalisation, which is the significance of commodity fetishism, is the result of interpellation of individualism through a historical process. “[T]he *economic categories*, already discussed by us [in discussing PPE], *bear the stamp of history*. Definite *historical conditions* are necessary that a product may become a commodity. It must not be produced as the immediate means of subsistence of the producer himself. Had we gone further, and inquired under what circumstances all, or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we should have found that this can only happen with production of a very specific kind, capitalist production. *Such an inquiry, however, would have been foreign to the analysis of commodities*” (C1, 118, emphasis added). This takes us back to an enigma

that has been the subject of much controversy: why does Marx start *Capital* from commodities and exchange when he wants to dig below the surface of the market, which was the preserve of vulgar economists, and show the ‘master-servant relation’ within the factory while ‘equality and Bentham’ presided outside? What he is saying amounts to the assertion that SCP economy is a historical absurdity. The majority of products can be produced for the market only when production is capitalist i.e. not only products but also labour power has also become a commodity. But he is starting from SCP because to start from capitalist production “*would have been foreign to the analysis of commodities*”. The author reads this to mean that in his presentation he uses a *semblance* of the method of Hegel, though in his enquiry he has already established that this is not the proper logic. His method of presentation *appears* to proceed from simple categories to the more complex. In this sense there is some similarity with Hegel’s method¹¹. But even this similarity is only apparent. As Althusser observes in the quote we have used, in Hegel’s logic the higher generalities are complex only in appearance: the lower moments being totally sublimated and remaining as phantoms or memories. In Marx’s scheme, however, the movement from simpler determinants towards social complexity involves O-C and not sublimation. That is why commodities, in Marx’s scheme retain both their concrete (use value) and abstract (AL) aspects.

But to come back to his enquiry: this passage clearly states that commodity fetishism the process that reconciles the dual aspects of products the moment they have become commodities (viz. Their qualitative differences and their quantitative sameness) is the result of political, cultural, economic processes that led to the interpellation of individual as subject through the violent processes of birth and sustenance of capitalism. Violence implies the absence of linear, fated logical process, say, the failure of triadic logic and simultaneously the installation of the logic of overdetermination.

Marx says that most of products become commodities only with the spread of capitalism. One of the reasons behind this assertion is that PA¹² involves the breakup of the community. Within a community the allocation of social labour is direct (by consent or command) taking into account only the aspect of difference of goods and the labours that go into their production. It is only with the breakup of the communities, urbanisation, etc. that the direct allocation of labour breaks down and together with it the direct relations between human beings in society. With capitalism also comes a new commodity, which is absent in the SCP economy – labour power commodity. This brings in its train the new violence or illogic of alienation and degradation of labour. Through all these and other interwoven political, cultural and economic processes is born the dichotomous character of goods as commodities buttressed (i.e. made socially acceptable) by subjectivities interpellated by CF. These processes interact to give birth to particular subjectivities that can reconcile the dichotomy (between qualitative difference and quantitative identity of commodities), in other words subjectivities that manage to reconcile living in societies that appear not to be societies.

The ruling order interpellates subjectivities that generate its hegemony. To overthrow the existing order the subaltern classes must think counter hegemonic subjectivities. While *Capital* does provide an analytic of the capitalist order, one must remember that there is no truthful analysis, the days of scientificity are long dead. *Capital* just like neoclassical economics was written from a particular perspective, producing its own truth. Neoclassical economics produced and continues to produce a truth that is part of the ideological state apparatus; *Capital* produced a truth that belongs to critical, counter hegemonic venture. This is one way we can understand Amariglio and Callari’s contention “Equality of exchange can be theorized only by reference to a property of the objects of trade other than actual labor times. *It is possible to define this property in a variety of ways*, each of which signifies particular, hence, different forms of consciousness and agency.”

The analogy that Marx draws between CF and God fetishism is appropriate for the Hegelian or neoclassical definition of the ‘property of the object that trade’. It is not proper for Marx’s own reading of this property, viz. abstract labour. Subjective utilities are eternally given by the autonomous preferences of individuals and, in the Hegelian or neoclassical reading, their ratios forever relate as equalities to the price ratios. The qualitative differences are sublimated in the quantitative equalities following the Hegelian process of movement to higher universals. In Marxian analysis of CF both quality and quantity remain embedded in the product. Thus Marx’s CF is a tense field that undergoes mutations and can be deployed to understand certain capitalist crises and for cultural counter mobilisation.

Hegelian and neoclassical commodity fetishism is unchanging in content, being determined purely by subjective valuation, independent of social order; Marx’s notion however is thoroughly materialist, rooted in the specific social order that produces commodity. This is also related to the retention of the two-fold character of labour and commodity. While in the SCP economy the law of value (exchange values proportional to AL values) holds; in the capitalist economy the values are transformed to prices of production because of the differences in the organic composition in the different lines of production. This transformation, that has generated a lot of controversy, indicates, as pointed out by Bannerjee¹³, that the differences in the qualities of commodities – here reflected in the differences in organic composition – influence the relation between the values and prices. This transformation is also related to the political and cultural processes that determine the value of labour power in a particular productive activity in a social conjuncture, as this influences the organic composition of capital.

Because of the social, hence historical, character of the mode of equalisation of the qualitatively unequal commodities, it is susceptible to changes in the character of capital. The current era of capital, variously termed as post-Fordism, autonomisation of capital, etc. without going into the important debates regarding the characterisation of this age, we can make some preliminary suggestions for enquiry of lines along which CF may be rethought keeping in mind the changes.

Recollect Rubin’s claim that CF has a material basis as it is through the equalisation (in terms of exchange values) of commodities that are qualitatively different (in terms of use value) that social division of labour is achieved in a commodity producing economy. Financialisation gives at least two twists to this deployment of CF. In the age of financialisation that is necessarily coupled with the post-Fordist age of fragmentation of production process and their global outsourcing, this link becomes tenuous and has to be rethought. Hilferding (1981) hits the nail right on the head when he comments: ‘The producer does not learn whether his commodity really satisfies a social need or whether he has made the correct use of his labour time until after the completion of the exchange.’ When we have global value chains, the question of ‘completion of exchange’ has to be fundamentally re-examined. Apart from this, the fact that the value chain extends downwards into non-capitalist class process based or feudo-capitalist class process based productive units the relation between the unequal (quality) and equal (quantity) relation that constitutes the problem of CF requires to be revisited. This will also bring in its train rethinking the categories of subsumed and fundamental class payments as rent and interest move to centre stage in the play of exploitative payments.

Another insight from Hilferding needs to be pondered: “As an exchange value, however, a commodity finds its immediate expression in money, the use value of which is nothing but the embodiment of socially necessary labour time, that is, exchange value. Money, therefore, makes the exchange value of a commodity independent of its use value. Only the transformation of money into a good realizes the use value of the good.” This introduction of the time factor is an important element that has to be explored. You can continuously go on differing the realisation. This was the

promise on which most of the bubbles and most particularly the housing bubble were based. If everyone thought that realty prices would keep increasing they would have been increasing. In this case where was the independence of use value and exchange value?

We had said at the outset that it is necessary to reread a lot of Marx in order to rethink politics. We conclude by reading an important political connotation of CF that is largely ignored by the communist parties though we find the statement of the problem in the *Communist Manifesto*. The analysis of commodity fetishism through the analytical field generated by abstract labour shows that the subjectivities interpellated by capitalist commodity production is shot through and through with bourgeois individuality and equality. As the author had pointed out in an earlier piece (Basu, 2012), Marx, in talking of the immediate post-revolutionary society, mentions in *The Critique of the Gotha Program* “Hence, equal right here is still in principle – bourgeois right . . . this equal right is still constantly stigmatized by a bourgeois limitation. The right of the producers is proportional to the labor they supply; the equality consists in the fact that measurement is made with an equal standard, labor.” (Marx 1875, 5) In other words, even the consciousness of the working class for itself is stigmatized by this limitation of subjectivity constituted by CF. The principle of quantitative equalization of unequal qualities in commodities works in the case of labour power commodity. This brings to the fore the problem that Gramsci was to talk of later: the problem of struggle for cultural hegemony as an autonomous component of workers’ struggles. This relates to the imagination, construction and struggle for socialist consciousness.

Notes

¹ The author is deeply indebted to the late Pradip Bannerjee, who died while writing his PhD dissertation. He first pointed out to the author, the significance of the simultaneous existence of the concrete and the abstract in Marx’s method. The author hopes someday he can manage to edit and publish his unfinished thesis.

² We know that matter, as such never enters our consciousness. The difference then is between what thought concrete and thought abstract; the former is an overdetermined totality ever escaping

³ In the sequence of presentation in *Capital* the starting point is exchange by petty producers. Labour power has not yet become a commodity. However, as we will show, in the same volume Marx says that capitalist order is necessary for production to be dominated by the motive of commodity exchange.

⁴ “The will which exists absolutely is truly infinite, because its object being the will itself, is for it not another or a limitation. In the object the will has simply reverted into itself.” (Para 22) “This subjectivity is (a) pure form or absolute unity of self-consciousness with itself. This unity is the equation “I = I,” consciousness being characterized by a thoroughly inward and abstract self-dependence.” (Para 25)

⁵ “A person in his direct and definite individuality is related to a given external nature. To this outer world the personality is opposed as something subjective. But to confine to mere subjectivity the personality, which is meant to be infinite and universal, contradicts and destroys its nature. It bestirs itself to abrogate the limitation by giving itself reality, and proceeds to make the outer visible existence its own.” (Para 39)

⁶ “In order to fix property as the outward symbol of my personality, it is not enough that I represent it as name and internally will it to be mine; I must also take it over into my possession. The embodiment of my will can then be recognized by others as mine. That the object, of which I take possession be unowned is a self-evident, negative condition. Rather it is more than a bare negative, since it anticipates a relation to others. A person’s putting his will into an object is the conception of property, and the next step is the realizing of it. The inner act of my will, which says that something is mine, must be made recognizable for others.” (51)

⁷ “Outward and visible existence, as definite, is essentially existence for another thing. . . . But property is also a manifestation of will, and the other, for which it exists, is the will of another person. This reference of will to will is the true and peculiar ground on which freedom is realized. The means by which I hold property, not by

virtue of the relation of an object to my subjective will, but by virtue of another will, and hence share in a common will, is contract.” (Para 71).

⁸ “In use the object is a single one, definite in quality and quantity, and answers to a special need. But its special usefulness, when fixed quantitatively, can be compared with other objects capable of being put to the same use, and a special want, served by the object, and indeed any want may be compared with other wants; and their corresponding objects may be also compared. This universal characteristic, which proceeds from the particular object and yet abstracts from its special qualities is the value. Value is the true essence or substance of the object, and the object by possessing value becomes an object for consciousness.” (para 63, emphasis added)

⁹ “In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another, as persons whose will resides in those object, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and part with his own, except by means of an act done by mutual consent. They must therefore, mutually recognise in each other the rights of private proprietors.” (C1, 59)

¹⁰ ‘Despite Marx’s strong disavowals, *Capital* is indebted for much of its potency and resonance to ideas he disavowed, including most notably an Enlightenment humanist understanding of labor as the origin of all wealth and a discourse of rights in which man’s entitlement to the fruits of his labor is naturally ordained.’ (Gibson-Graham 2000).

¹¹ In his exposition of the method of enquiry and presentation/analysis in *Grundrisse* (100) Marx says that first the simple or elementary aspects or ‘simplest determinations’ of a complex whole are discovered then starting from the simple determinants the complex totality is constructed in thought ‘as a rich totality of many determinations and relations’.

¹² The point that PA is no longer accepted as merely primitive and hence the term has been substituted with Harvey’s coinage – accumulation by dispossession – is not relevant to the current discussion.

¹³ Chapter 5 of the unfinished PhD thesis of Pradip Bannerjee.

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Marx, China, and Translation in the Postcolonial Condition: From “Linguistic Context” to “Sinification”

Jon Solomon *

The Institutional Context of Sinicized Marxism Studies

In this presentation, the author would like to situate the so-called “Sinification of Marxism” hotly debated by Chinese intellectuals today within the context of the postcolonial condition brilliantly elaborated by Samaddar (2018).

The first aspect of this context to which the author would like to draw attention is the most obvious: economic growth. As the People’s Republic of China (PRC) nears the end of a third decade of breakneck growth since 1990, catapulting the nation into the position of the world’s largest economy, one is not surprised to discover the enthusiasm with which an increasing proportion of university-based intellectuals in China have turned their attention to the Communist Party Of China (CCP)’s official policy of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Casual on-line searches, perusal of data bases, and the occasional anecdotal evidence suggest that there has been a veritable explosion of intellectual work within China devoted to the historical, political, social, cultural, and economic dimensions of the party-state policy and related issues. Undoubtedly, the frenetic level of growth in the national economy has been mirrored in the realm of intellectual production. Part of the reason for this parallel is related to the Chinese government’s fabled appetite for infrastructural projects. The number of universities in China has more than doubled since 1999, when the government launched a program massively to expand university attendance. In the midst of this infrastructural expansion, many new departments and programs have been created. On December 3, 2005, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council together with the Ministry of Education jointly promulgated the “Notice About Adjusting and Expanding the Primary Level Discipline of Marxist Theory and Its Sub-fields,” which officially established the basis for “Sinicized Marxism Studies” as a sub-field of the Primary Discipline of Marxist Theory. An indication of the rapid growth of this new sub-field can be gleaned anecdotally from news reports of the *National Conference for the Establishment of Academic Norms for the Field of Sinicized Marxism Studies*, an academic conference jointly organized by several top universities in Beijing in December, 2016, that gathered representatives from over 50 Institutes of “Sinicized Marxism Studies” from universities around the nation (Renminwang 2016). So that means at least 50 new institutes in the space of a decade.

As an institutional formation, these new programs are clearly modelled on the North American precedent of “studies institutes” (such as Women’s Studies, Animal Studies, and Asian-

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American Studies, etc.) that have mushroomed since the 1960s following the phenomenon known as the “democratization of the university” that occurred in North American higher education following demobilization after the Second World War. Like their North American counterparts, they are essentially pluridisciplinary in nature. Needless to say, important related work continues to come from older conventional disciplines such as Economics, Marxism-Leninism Institutes, Sociology, etc. While it is difficult for the author to generalize at this early stage of my research, he will hazard a qualification of the general intellectual milieu that motivates these pluridisciplinary programmes and related institutional sites. First of all, the sub-field of “Sinicized Marxism Studies” is, like all fields and disciplines in the Chinese university system, overseen by organs of the state. A remark about state censorship and state intervention – questions that are generally highlighted by the policy-oriented side of international China Studies and China-related journalism – is thus warranted. As has been noted in relation to the Great Firewall, market dominance, particularly in the age of big data, is one of the principal motivations behind state control of informational flows today. Of course, there is also a well-documented political component, which the author has no intention of minimizing. Yet when it comes to understanding university-based intellectual production, he does not think that a coercive-model of power relations is going to be very useful for understanding the relation between university-based Sinicized Marxism Studies and the Chinese Party-State any more than it would be for understanding any other humanistic field such as English Literature. A much more direct and fruitful line of approach would begin by taking into account the peculiarities of the salary and research funding structure of university-based labour in China in order to arrive at an understanding of the various subtle forces that cultivate the desire-to know among individual researchers and the disciplinary system of rewards and sanctions associated with it. In lieu of explanations that begin from the problem of censorship, a much more persuasive explanation comes from the internal logic of the formation of the field of Sinicized Marxism Studies itself. Following a global trend, Marxist Economics in China has had to cede its institutional prerogative in China to Management Studies. At the same time, the past several decades have also seen a remarkable explosion of interest, both inside academia and in society-at-large, in so called *Guoxue* Studies – Nativist or National Culture Studies. Gaining unprecedented symbolic and material status, National Culture Studies today enjoy an institutional position – including new university programmes and institutes, websites, and news organizations – in China that is unlike anything seen since 1949, if not since the birth of the modern Chinese university at the end of the 19th century – a time when the relational field of discourse, discipline and institution was quite different from today’s configuration. While there are many other factors that go into the intellectual and institutional milieu in which Sinicized Marxism Studies coalesce, the synergy between Management Studies and Nativist Studies palimpsestically grafted over Marxist Studies not only defines, in my estimation, the exclusions and presuppositions that constitute the formation of any given field, but also reveals the extent to which the opposition between the “global” and the “local” specific to Sinicized Marxism Studies, i.e., that between Management Studies and National Culture Studies, must be understood within the horizon of the postcolonial condition during the era of neoliberalism.

Sinification as Epistemology and as Social Relation

The English term “Sinification” or “Sinicization” is a polyvalent term that roughly corresponds to two variants in modern Mandarin Chinese 中国化 *zhongguohua* and 汉化 *hanhua* – the latter term referring specifically to the so-called Han ethnicity that composed over 90% of the PRC’s national

population according to the 2000 census. The transparency of meaning normally associated with the term, especially in the social and historical sciences, is yet another symptom of the general postcolonial condition that we – no matter what language “we” speak – inhabit today. In order to highlight the problematic nature of the English term, it is useful to review its enormous semantic range, variously covering: 1) a series of policies or social and political technologies applied by (or submitted to by) successive imperial dynasties with regard to the borderlands and population management; 2) a process of assimilation associated with diverse phenomenon from population management to religious conversion; 3) a process of epistemological adaptation or filtering that ostensibly occurs in the transfer or translation of foreign concepts, discourses, institutions, and practices into the Chinese space; and 4) any kind of social, political or cultural process mediated by the determining effect of national cultural forms. As can be seen from above, the concept of Sinification is inseparable from the genealogy of the modern concepts of nation, people, and language. A Romantic building-block of the imperial colonial modernity, Sinification inherits many presuppositions from the colonial discourse of national character. This discourse derives its roots from the presuppositions of international law developed by Grotius, who held that all peoples were possessed of the same capacity for reason, while some peoples were burdened by cultural traits that ineluctably led to deviation from its universal norms. The positing of cultural difference based in a theory of national traits that deviate from a universal norm is, as Antony Anghie has described, the foundational moment of modern international law. Clearly, the presuppositions of this discourse extend well beyond the confines of a single domain or discipline, delineating what might be called archaeology of national character. According to the structure of abnormal deviation, national character invariably operates according to a schema of return. In failing to live up to the universal norm of reason, cultural traits specific to a national people exercise a determining influence upon social action. The colonial discourse of national character is thus at once an ontology of individuation (it tells us how to recognize collective individuals) and a theory of causal relations (it explains why some things happen and others do not).

Providing an intellectual infrastructure spanning both the linguistic and institutional aspects of discursive formation, Sinification is variously the name for new degree conferring graduate programs established over the past several decades in Chinese universities, an official policy and theoretical line (“Socialism with Chinese characteristics”) authorized and promoted by the Chinese Communist Party, and a general taxonomy of knowledge production based on the anthropological notion of “linguistic context” introduced into China through Hong Kong since the 1990s. Comprised of various practices and institutions, Sinification might best be thought of as an *apparatus of translation* that produces subjective effects through the *spatialization of translational practice into an interface or border* between the putative exteriority of “Marxism” and the ostensible interiority of a “Chinese linguistic context.” This presentation proposes to construct a genealogy of Sinification in relation to the concept of *postcolonial condition* elaborated by Samaddar (2018). The condition that we have in mind is precisely the link between the process of valorization and the index of anthropological difference, in which two parallel operations of translation (our word for context-specific ontogenesis) occur: the first being the translation from use value and social value to exchange value, while the second is the translation of social difference, always in a process of becoming, into taxonomies of specific (or species) difference. The postcolonial condition is thus the name for the link between an apparatus of area-and-anthropological difference and the regime of capitalist accumulation. In other words, just as we need to understand how the commodification of labour oversees a process that leads to the overcoding of labour by as anthropological difference taken to be, or misrecognized as, posterior, so we also need to understand how the areal appellations typical

of the imperial-colonial modernity, such as “Chinese” and “Western,” are the product of the modern regime of translation. Viewing these operations in parallel permits us to link up two very different kinds of translation in the social: the translation of social value into exchange value and the translation of social difference into taxonomical species difference.

Another crucial aspect of the essentially colonial character of the term “Sinification” concerns its ubiquitous international usage, which largely accounts for the transparency often associated with the term. Taken by “Chinese” and “non-Chinese” alike to refer to a manifest language-people binome the individuality of which unquestionably occupies the realm of the given, Sinification has a long history of unexplained usage in Sinological studies. It is this quality of givenness *as a form of social relationship* that particularly needs to be interrogated with the resources of Marxism in relation to the general problematic of the postcolonial condition. This is precisely the fundamental problem identified by Samaddar when he speaks of, “the obligation of a postcolonial argument to struggle against the condition of its own existence.” Samaddar’s identification of “a struggle between a critical postcolonial approach (which is transformative) and postcolonial studies (which takes the postcolonial condition as given and immutable)” is as fundamental as his observation that “Marx is essential for us to make this distinction and clarify the fundamental opposition between two strands of postcolonialism” (Samaddar 2018, 23). Marxism offers us, in other words, an especially interesting opportunity to engage in *the interrogation of the given as an ideologically-overdetermined form of social relations*, both on account of its own specific historical experience in traversing the imperial colonial bipolarity of capitalist modernity and also because of its theoretical critique of ontological givenness through the admittedly problematic categories of production, relationality, determination, and causality.

Mao Zedong’s “Sinification” of Marxism

The notion of the Sinification of Marxism enjoys a rich historical usage (see Liu 2017 for a brief, yet comprehensive and thought-provoking, account) that dates back to a talk by Mao Zedong from December, 1938. In relation to Mao’s understanding of Sinification, there are basically two, opposing currents of thought that dominate China Studies conducted in non-Chinese language media outside of the People’s Republic of China. The first, represented by Stuart Schram and Nick Knight, essentially holds the notion that both “Marxism” and “Chinese” are known quantities. For these authors, Sinification is a completely transparent and unproblematic term. It is merely enough to show that Mao employs a traditional turn of phrase, or stresses the adaptation of Marxism to Chinese particularities to justify the use of the word Sinification without any need to consider the extremely unstable position of the modern nation-state within the colonial-imperial modernity and its highly problematic relation to the past. A second current, represented by Arif Dirlik and Rebecca Karl, is highly suspicious of this approach. As Rebecca Karl succinctly summarizes: “Mao Zedong Thought is also usually said to be a ‘sinification’ of Marxism, or the making of Marxism Chinese. This formulation is inadequate, however, as it takes Marxism as a unified dogma and considers Chinese as a settled cultural predisposition. Marxism was (and continues to be) a much-contested matter, and, in the 1930s, ‘Chinese’ was the subject of intense struggle. It is more appropriate to see Mao Zedong Thought as the product of Mao’s simultaneous interpretation of Chinese history and China’s present through Marxist categories and the interpretation of Marxist categories through the specific historical situation of China. This mutual interpretation is the motivating dialectic of Mao’s theory and revolutionary practice.” (Karl 2010, 53) Although Karl does not make the citation explicit, she is undoubtedly referencing or echoing “Mao Zedong and ‘Chinese Marxism’”, Dirlik’s landmark essay

from 1996 that highlighted the problem of “mutual interpretation” in the context of intense struggle over the forms of political and social organization.

The most promising aspect of Dirlik’s approach to Mao lies in his characterization of an Althusserian moment where the theory of structural, or immanent, causality and overdetermination is put into practice. Referring to one of Mao’s central theoretical texts, “On Contradiction”, Dirlik writes: “‘On Contradiction’ depicts a world (and mode of grasping it) in which not ‘things’ but relationships are the central data... These relationships do not coexist haphazardly, but constitute a totality structured by their many interactions, a totality that is nevertheless in a constant state of transformation” (Dirlik 1996, 131). As both Karl and Dirlik (but not Knight and Schram) recognize, the central challenge for understanding the “Sinification of Marxism” hinges upon the extent to which both of the terms, “China” and “Marxism,” are understood not as static entities that either precede their historic encounter (as teleological cause) or follow from a larger story of universalization (mechanistic effect), but rather as temporal potentialities continuously individuated out of social relations. Informed by a processual ontology situated in the context of political struggle, the entities such as “Marxism” and “Chinese” that simultaneously operate as both cause and effect are considered to be, according to an Althusserian vocabulary, *overdetermined*. The question of causality, in other words, cannot be handled in a mechanistic or teleological way.

It is worth underlining in passing the significance of the Althusserian intervention into the problem of causality for our understanding of the colonial-imperial modernity. A certain *regime of causality* not only defines the essence of colonial governmentality, it also crucially instantiates the disciplines of knowledge tasked with managing all the forms of knowledge inherited from the past that might be seen as “abnormal deviations” due to “national character.” A superior understanding of the epistemological laws of causality in tandem with a more powerful application or deployment of that understanding (in the form of colonial science) is both a justification for the legitimacy of colonial governmentality and one of its main ideological forms. With this observation in mind, we might reflect on the implications for a comparison between Mao and Althusser, particularly with the regard to the former’s emphasis on the priority of praxis, which leads Dirlik to conclude – in the author’s estimation somewhat hastily – that Mao’s “notion of causation, therefore, remains less theorized than Althusser’s” (Dirlik 1996, 136). This reflection is not designed to privilege the revolutionary over the schoolteacher, but rather to help us pinpoint the exact locus of praxis and theory, in relation to Dirlik’s reading of Mao, beyond Dirlik.

The principal reason we must entertain the “Dirlik beyond Dirlik” gesture boils down to this: Dirlik’s bold attempt to situate Mao’s “Sinification” of Marxism firmly in the practices of structural causality and overdetermination is hobbled by the stubbornly residual force of the given. It appears notably in the guise of something that Dirlik calls “Chinese society itself” (Dirlik 1996, 124). Asserting that an entity called Chinese society “remained the locus of its own history” throughout the transition to a modern nation-state, Dirlik struggles to reconcile this “locus” with the “displacement” and “relocation” of that same society into the global. The Althusserian (or Maoist) echo in Dirlik’s conclusion that “Our conception of China (as well as the Chinese conception of self) is of necessity ‘overdetermined’” (Dirlik 1996, 124) is muffled by the unexamined presuppositions of pronominal invocation. Unquestionably, the implication is that not just “Chinese society,” but also the putative totality of “the West” is simply given. This is the moment where Dirlik’s text nods at Sinification as a social relationship. Yet, as is characteristic of China Studies in general, there is confusion between the social and the epistemological. In its reinstatement of the phenomenological givenness of a Self-Other dichotomy in the separate fields of both knowledge and experience, the formula advanced by Dirlik merely heightens the mystery surrounding the drama of overdetermination. Worse yet, the

confusion is compounded by a displacement from the social to the epistemological. Even though it is said to be ‘overdetermined,’ the social, or practical, quality of the Self-Other relationship is articulated, in a wholly transparent and unproblematic way, to the completely heterogeneous register of the epistemological. The Self-Other relationship is no longer a practical matter of sociality, but a matter of representation in the field of knowledge. Displaced to the epistemological-representational level, the Self-Other relationship manifestly falls outside the loop of the processual, relational ontology at the heart of Dirlik’s Althusserian (and Jamesonian) methodological concerns.

One way to bring Dirlik’s fecund approach back to the promise of immanent causality he first discovered might be found in Dirlik’s seminal observation that Sinification, as understood by Mao, was primarily a practice of translation. Since translation is a key theme in the author’s approach to the postcolonial problematic denoted by the Sinification of Marxism, it is necessary to highlight its importance beyond the illustrative metaphorical significance implicitly ascribed to it by Dirlik. Even though Dirlik claims at the outset of his essay that “One of Mao’s greatest strengths as a leader was his ability to translate Marxist concepts into a Chinese idiom” (Dirlik 1996, 120), this translational ability is never elevated to the level of a theoretical concern on par with the notions of structural causality and overdetermination that Dirlik otherwise grants theoretical authority. Even though Dirlik argues “that Mao’s Marxism represents a local or vernacular version of a universal Marxism” (Dirlik 1996, 123), he never takes the problem of language and translation as a question of *both* social *and* theoretical praxis. Throughout Dirlik’s essay, translation thus remains trapped in the straitjacket of a usage that is at once either too metaphorical or else too empirical. The operation that Dirlik variously describes as “rephras[ing] it [Marxism] in a Chinese vernacular” (Dirlik 1996, 123 and 128), or “rephras[ing] in a national voice” (Dirlik 1996, 125), or a “Marxism...spoken in a vernacular voice by a Chinese subject who expressed through Marxism local, specifically Chinese, concerns” (Dirlik 1996, 128), is never actually theorized. Instead, Dirlik uncritically relies on the spatial metaphors of transfer, displacement, relocation, filtering and adaptation that have been the hallmark of the modern regime of translation throughout the colonial-imperial modernity. Nowhere is translation taken into account in the understanding of the vast transformations occurring since the beginning of the 20th Century in the practice and definition of the “Chinese vernacular.” In other words, the role of translation in the highly theoretical operations required to manage the transition from an Empire to a modern nation-state – including the creation of a national language and the representation of a national people – are simply not accounted for.

Nevertheless, Dirlik’s emphasis on the role of translation as a social praxis in Mao’s theoretical formulation of Marxism deserves elaboration. The key lies in our understanding of translation as a social practice that demands a corresponding understanding of theory as a social praxis, too. Let’s take our cue from Dirlik. The importance of translation was first discovered, Dirlik asserts, by Chinese revolutionaries in the midst of practical struggle that forced them to traverse a kind of internal frontier between urban and rural space. (In our view, a more accurate description of the spatial geography being negotiated would emphasize the difference in terms of incommensurate spaces of in-betweenness: the in-between space of the extra-territorial urban centre (Shanghai) versus the in-between space of the small-scale local city (Yanan) that has continually been a flash point for social ferment since the 19th century):

The revolutionaries themselves were outsiders to this agrarian social situation (and, therefore, in contradiction to it) and had to maneuver with great care in order not antagonize the population and jeopardize their own existence. Therefore, they could not translate the multifaceted conflicts they encountered readily into *their* theoretical categories, but rather had to recognize these conflicts as

irreducible features of the social situation in which to articulate theory. This is what raised the question of the language of revolution at the most fundamental level (Dirlik 1996, 130).

Here we find a metaphorical conception of translation that sees it as the negotiation of social difference and exteriority at a linguistic level. Translation is mapped onto spatiality in terms of the static, pre-constituted frontier. A bit later, Dirlik reminds us that, “the first calls for translating Marxism into the language of the masses coincided with the appearance of a guerilla strategy of revolution (and not by Mao but by others in the Party)” (Dirlik 1996, 141). Translation in this instance is no longer simply a metaphor for the negotiation of social difference, but rather a key element of guerrilla strategy against a Fascist state apparatus. Dirlik’s brilliant formulations suffer from a couple of serious limitations that must be removed in order to fully reap the benefits of their insight. First, it is essential to understand that the “language of the masses” was not a given entity, but itself a site of intense struggle. Qu Qiubai, one of the founders of the CPC and its chairman before Mao, had been busy in the early 1930s (before his assassination at the hands of the Fascists in 1935) developing a theory of national language that would not be based on intervention by a central state, as had been the case in the nation-building projects animated by capitalist regimes, but rather would rely on a non-centralized, non-standardized notion of the *common*. Qu’s name for this language was, tellingly, the “Common Language” (*putonghua* 普通话) – which he critically pitted against the term “national language” which he attributed to a capital-state nexus. Significantly, translation played a key role in the development of this non-national, Common Language, with regard to what Qu somewhat simplistically viewed as either external or internal socio-linguistic differences. In other words, translation, not sovereignty, would be the model of the society to which Qu’s Common Language would correspond. This particular point was fundamentally at odds with Mao’s investment in the model of sovereign power (and causal relations), exemplified by his call, “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution,” in the famous speech, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society,” from 1926 that subsequently became the first lines of the canonical post-revolutionary text, *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*. Second, the notion of translation as an element of revolutionary struggle really means that the negotiation of social difference is at the heart of the revolutionary enterprise. Needless to say, the kinds of social difference at stake here go well beyond the linguistic in a narrow sense. If Mao’s thought, as Alain Badiou has asserted, is characterized by its penchant for an open-ended infinity of struggle, we might, based on that notion, advance the concept of *infinite translation* or *permanent translation* (to paraphrase the lovely formula proposed by Rada Ivekovic) as the quintessential form of ideological struggle and revolutionary love. Mao’s “Sinification” of Marxism would thus be caught between the social praxis of infinite translation and the juridical model, or theory, of sovereign power. Hence, the assertion that Mao places praxis above theory needs to be re-evaluated in light of those places in Mao’s discourse where a juridical model of social relations based on the sovereign distinction between friends and enemies eclipses the open-ended, horizontal plane of social relations based on the indeterminate infinity of translation. The sovereigntist in Mao betrays a praxis-first approach, revealing instead a version of Mao that is deeply, thoroughly *theoretical* in the sense of ideology: the strong form of theory in colonial-imperial modernity invariably resides in the social forms of the given, such as the anthropological difference codified in the nation-state, that legitimate and naturalize capitalist accumulation. Nothing is more theoretical, in the final analysis, than the institution of the nation-state as a common sense quotidian reality. To summarize, then, “the Sinification of Marxism” is an ideologically ambivalent formula. At a general level, it is a mystification of social struggles in the (post)colonial condition that takes the form of the given, usually national or

civilizational difference. It can, however, with some effort, be mobilized towards a revolutionary praxis of permanent translation. As Mao says in his “Sinification” speech from 1938, “organization and struggle are the only solution.”

What Mao’s theory of revolutionary praxis as translation (and of translation as a revolutionary social praxis) is missing, thus, is a grasp of the way in which translation is not simply an operation that one applies to social objects in order to establish equivalence in the face of difference (the template of exchange value), but is rather the heart of subjective formation, the constitutive operation without which individuals – including collective individuals – cannot coalesce. Translation is not simply the process of bringing Marxism into the idiom of the Chinese masses, nor is it simply a means of transferring immaterial goods across pre-defined borders. It is rather an integral element in the composition of the masses (and of Marxism, one hopes) and the border, without which the masses would inevitably become nothing but a form of the given readily available for enclosure and value-capture by the bordering operations of the capital-state nexus. This lacuna in Mao accounts for the reason why his philosophy was much more suited to a civil war than to dealing with a state. Today, this historical blind spot in Maoism has been amplified a thousand-fold under Xi Jinping, justifying the subsumption of the forms of the past into a capitalist regime of accumulation.

The author hastens to add in our discussion of translation that we understand it not as a form of transfer or transposition between cultural individuals that pre-exist the translational encounter (i.e., we object to the notion of cultural translation), but rather as a moment of praxis when indeterminacy is mobilized in the service of individuation. Translation names the ontological primacy of relationship over individualization. Translation is thus precisely the form of praxis that corresponds to a theory of structural causality, i.e., a theory of social relationships in a constant state of transformation characterized at the epistemological level by ideological overdetermination. One might even hazard the maxim that a theory of structural causality bereft of a praxis of translation is a fundamental betrayal of the ideological critique at which it aims. From this perspective, Mao’s greatest contribution to revolutionary thought might one day be seen as the realization that praxis is translation, while translation is a social praxis, and the praxis of translation demands intervention into the ideological struggles around theory and other apparatuses of the capitalist state.

Defend *Das Kapital*

*Defend Capital: an outline of a social theory of economic formations*¹ is the eye-catching title of a mammoth work published in 2014 by Xu Guangwei (b. 1971), a professor in the School of Economics, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics. Topping out at over 700 pages, the original edition was released in a revised and expanded version three years later in time for the 150th anniversary of the first volume of *Das Kapital*. In addition, subsequent to the publication of the first edition of *Defend Capital*, Xu has published, as of early 2018, at least over a dozen articles as well as a blog that further elaborate, defend, and contextualize the arguments presented in *Defend Capital*.

Xu completed a Ph.D. in the Department of Economics, People’s University, Beijing. The title of his 2007 dissertation, *Marxist Corporate Ethics: A Modern Paradigm*, suggests that his educational background is very much informed by Management Studies. Combined with the overt investment in National Culture Studies (*guoxue*) that defines *Defend Capital*, the work is squarely situated in, and actually quite representative of, the intellectual and institutional milieu that we described at the outset of this presentation.

Given space limitations, this presentation will not attempt to provide an in-depth reading of *Defend Capital* as a whole, but is rather focused on quickly summarizing aspects of the work that will

help us understand how it stages the problem of the given (in the form of the historical past), or again, the problem of ontogenesis and individuation in the social, that constitutes a crucial vector of overdetermination and causality in the postcolonial condition. First, a brief introduction to the structure of the text, which is divided into four main sections, the titles of which are as follows:

1. The linguistic context of action: critique and construction (General Introduction).
2. The base for a social theory of economic formation: a critique of social subjectivism (The unified formation of methodological critique and intellectual history).
3. The architecture of the social theory of economic formations: a critique of social objectivity (The unified formation of objective logic and subjective logic).
4. Putting to work the social theory of economic formations: inheriting and transcending the Marxist revolution.

Another useful date point for situating the text can be found in the list of bibliographic sources with which the author entertains a dialogue. While an entire chapter of the first section is devoted to Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) – whose book cover incidentally provides the template for the graphic design of Xu's *Defend Capital* (both feature the book title against a cream background bordered by a red rectangle) – there is otherwise not much dialogue with contemporary Marxist theorists and philosophers outside of China². Yes, Negri's work on the *Grundrisse* (*Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*) is cited, as are several works of a more recent date by David Harvey, but the overall impression one takes away is that the book is essentially focused, in terms of its intertextual aspects, to staging a dialogue between classics from the canon of National Culture Studies and classics from the canon of 19th and 20th Century Marxist and Phenomenological philosophy in the West. The intensity of this focus accounts, perhaps, for the complete lack of attention to the burgeoning conversation in Marxist circles outside of China concerning the status of primitive accumulation, not just as a stage of history but as an apparatus integral to capitalism that manages the various kinds of transitions or borderings that it encounters, requires, and produces, as well as the crucial role such an apparatus plays in the production of subjectivity.

In spite of the apparent absence of dialogue with contemporary Marxist thought outside of China, the work is still very much a part of the contemporary era. The core of the interface lies in the historicity of the concept of ontogenesis, recalling to mind the way in which ontology has become a central issue for contemporary Western theorists such as Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze and others (whose names remain not cited by Xu). Unlike these Western theorists, however, Xu's original analysis expands on the notion of a particularly Chinese dialectic, exemplified by the 6th-century BCE Taoist classic, *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing*), that had figured as a central theme a decade prior in Chen Tianshan's *Chinese Dialectics: From Yijing to Marxism* (2005). Focused on the historical dialectic between theory and practice, Xu Guangwei aims to provide a Marxist account not just for the historical transitions in the mode of production, but also for the epistemological transitions in the social organization of knowledge production, while crucially avoiding the pitfalls of modern materialist ontologies based on bourgeois assumptions pertaining to the identity of the individual as a given point of departure. Yet what is particularly surprising about Xu's project is, as we have mentioned, the extent to which resources in *Das Kapital*, such as the concept of original accumulation that has recently received so much renewed attention among scholars outside of China, are abandoned in favour of a static, spatialized, and ultimately given, notion of the *border* that fails to live up to the productivist ontology, or ontogenesis, that occupies a central place in Xu Guangwei's theoretical enterprise.

The border at stake here is that between China and the West. By virtue of this givenness of the border, production and circulation of intellectual ideas follows a strictly proprietary logic according to which historical origins are not only unambiguously associated with contemporary proprietors, but also with rights of possession. Citing Wang Ya'nan (1901-1969), one of the original translators of *Das Kapital* into Chinese, Xu writes in the preface to *Defend Capital*: “If Economics, given as a foreign import, were not transformed, it would, from the perspective of the nation-state, truly constitute a kind of weapon for cultural invasion or intellectual anaesthesia that would prevent the social and economic transformation of said country from proceeding according to the national will”³ (Xu 2014, 12). Among the overriding assumptions of the text is the notion that an absolute, and absolutely identifiable, difference divides China from the West. The kernel of this difference is to be found in the notion of “linguistic context”: “*Das Kapital*’s arrival in China was simultaneous with the historical footsteps traced by the development of Oriental Economics. Since that moment, the people of our nation have ceaselessly strived to explore how to read and apply, within the Chinese linguistic context, this impressive work, especially with regard to suitably grasping the esoteric language that lies buried within it” (Xu 2014, 3). Clearly, the work has set the stage for an analytic of translation, behind which are couched the criterion that constitute the identity of the idealized Chinese reader or subject of knowledge. Some clues are given in relation to the author’s own self-description/ dedication: “History, thought, language, and culture – the Sinic Filiation – have cultivated a country of the Great Unity. Principally, this means: • This work has been achieved through the working identity of an economist who also enjoys the qualifications of being a Chinese; • This is a great chapter in theoretical economics written according to the reading customs and usage habits of Chinese people; • This is a methodological systematization that takes into account our people’s habits in historical writing and which adheres to Chinese people’s model of thought; • In short, this book is dedicated to the construction of Chinese Economics!” (Xu 2014, 3) The apparent immodesty of this list has to be balanced against the recognition that it is largely derived from and modeled upon ideas from Wang Ya'nan, one of the founders of Marxist Economics in Socialist China (Chen 2002 cited in Xu 2017). The “qualification of being a Chinese” concerns not simply a mother tongue and an ethnicity, but also an identification with a canon of great works that becomes the figure or image of Chineseness: “A Chinese who cannot understand *Tao Te Ching*, *Records of the Grand Historian*, or *Dream of the Red Chamber*, even though thoroughly ‘familiar’ with *Das Kapital*...would only be fully exposing his ‘high level’ of ignorance with regard to the working unity that exists between historical works and scientific works, and the articulation between the two.” (Xu 2014, 5)

The notion of “linguistic context” as a kind of unified anthropological image enters Chinese-language through a translation, *yujing* (语境), loosely attributed to Malinowski, then Skinner, that covers a semantic range from condition to border. Neither of the two sinograms that compose *yujing* are to be found in the commonly used term for context, *mailuo* (脉络). Inspired by Samaddar, we might look at the ambivalence of the Chinese translation of “linguistic context” as an experiment in what happens when the postcolonial condition is articulated to a certain concept of a *linguistic border mediated by a representational, spatialized scheme of translation*. In the manner of bourgeois presuppositions about the individual, so-called “cultural difference” is treated as an ontological given, a series of properties that inhere in an individual subject in an originary way prior to the chaos of social relations. This codified form of “difference” supposedly pre-exists the colonial encounter and hence pre-exists the capitalist mode of production that developed in historical synergy with colonialism. On the basis of this assumption, intellectual critique perennially grapples with the question of the relation

between a national historical tradition, understood in terms of subjective interiority, and its outside. Yet this is invariably an outside that has been posited from *within* the presuppositions of an inside which itself is – to an extent still to be determined – the product of a singular encounter between “outside” and “inside” that produced such revolutionary state apparatuses as the standardized national language known as Mandarin Chinese. The potentially tautological aspect of the spatialized representation of social difference reminds us of the problems of historiographic knowledge in the wake of primary accumulation; it reminds us especially of the extensive contemporary international discussion about primary accumulation as not so much an historical stage but as a permanent feature of the way in which capitalist social formations deal with the positing and appropriation of various forms of “outsides” through dispossession, extraction, commodification, and financialization. Curiously, this by-now extensive discussion has not gained any traction in Chinese Marxist discussions. This absence is all the more surprising given the extensive development seen over the past several decades in the “translate-and introduce” industry of local import agents in Chinese academic publishing that assures the logistics of translational flow.

If, as Xu Guangwei holds, the theory of ontogenesis is a crucial site for understanding the interface between Marxism and China, then we cannot afford to exclude either of those terms from the genetic indeterminacy that characterizes the production of subjectivity. In order to fully grasp the relation between regimes of accumulation and *the apparatus of area and anthropological difference* that is characteristic of the postcolonial condition, it is imperative to return to the moment of indeterminacy that characterizes translation both as an operation of valorization and as an operation of meaning-production. The key link between the two occurs in relation to subjectivity. The production of subjectivity through linguistic translation parallels the production of subjectivity through the commodification of labor. In terms of what this means for “China,” the implications could not be clearer: *Sinification*, whether in relation to the anthropological coding that occurs during the commodification of labor or during the production of knowledge, cannot be understood as an exclusively *Chinese* phenomenon or event, but must be understood as an integral part of the apparatus of area and anthropological difference central to the regimes of accumulation that characterize the postcolonial condition. In other words, our understanding of the postcolonial condition will be impossibly burdened by the presuppositions and assumptions that constitute the legacy of the postcolonial condition as a *history of individuation* if we simply accept the bourgeois forms of cultural individualization – particularly the nation-state and the civilizational area – that it has produced.

Refusing to accept these presuppositions, however, might be a question of desire more than knowledge. If, as Lisa Rofel eloquently argues (Rofel 2007), contemporary China can be understood through a proliferation of transnational desire that results – in the author’s reading of Rofel’s idea – in various forms of individualization (including the individualization of entities, such as neoliberalism, that many critics assume to be independent of China; see Rofel’s concluding chapter on China’s accession to the WTO), then it seems to the author that the industry of Sinicized Marxism Studies might also be fruitfully understood in relation to that context. The availability of disciplinary protocols that offer clear monetary and social rewards (and of course sanctions) for intellectual production is a powerful incentive towards individualization and identification in the construction of the desire-to-know. At the same time, the notion of Sinification operates as a tangible target that substitutes for an otherwise utterly elusive and chimerical identity. As Naoki Sakai has discussed in relation to Japanese thought, the identity of arealized thought (including, needless to say, that of the West) marks the impossibility of a limit. Yet while it may be impossible to produce the identity of thought under the sign of anthropological difference, it is entirely feasible, by contrast, to create and institutionalize a desire for that identity, no matter how unfeasible it may be. Sinicized Marxism

Studies would thus seem to be the place where that desire is provisionally located and reproduced, reinscribing the postcolonial condition in the process.

Given a limited amount of space and time, this presentation has not done justice to the complex nature of Xu Guangwei's work. The closest that we have come to penetrating Xu's discourse and mobilizing it against its own limitations (which is undoubtedly the highest form of praise) concerns the role of ontogenesis with regard to breaking apart the positivity of the given. Unable to develop this line of inquiry with the attention and nuance it deserves (we are talking about a corpus of texts that is quite large and theoretically dense), the author shall propose instead a series of examples for further discussion in the future. First, we must consider the discussions about Sinification within China in light of discussions about the Sinification of Marxism outside of China/Chinese language. It does not take long to discover that the ontological presuppositions about cultural individuality that constitute the basis of the discourse of Sinification in China are equally present in Western intellectual production. These presuppositions thus form a kind of international infrastructure for the division into discrete civilizational areas and nation-states inherited from the colonial-imperial modernity. Second, we might profit from a detour back to older resources in the supposed "Chinese linguistic context" that were overtly inspired by Marxism and yet came to very different conclusions about how to understand cultural nationalism in relation to capitalist production. One thinks in particular of the staging of the relation between the institution of finance and the institution of literature in Mao Dun's classic revolutionary novel *Midnight* (1933) and the contemporaneous writings during the early 1930s about language and translation by Qu Qiubai, an early Trotskyist leader of the CCP. Third, in order to further illustrate the culturalist turn that contemporary Chinese intellectual production has taken, we would do well to analyze the first volume of Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem* trilogy (2006 - 2010), the award-winning contemporary science fiction trilogy by Liu Cixin, as an example of the fetishization of the postcolonial condition in terms of a border-image mediated by the modern regime of translation.

Our goal is to understand the postcolonial condition in light of the modern regime of translation, and to understand the how the regimes of accumulation are related to the apparatus of area and anthropological difference that characterizes the postcolonial world, while at the same time accounting for and learning from the extraordinary forms of experimentation occurring in Chinese Marxism today, as in the past.

Notes

¹ The Chinese title unambiguously refers to *Das Kapital*, the work. The author shall hereafter abbreviate it as *Defend Capital*.

² While Xu qualifies Piketty's work as a "top flight product" of Economics, he is critical of its overwhelmingly positivist tendency that results in an insufficient or weak answer to the so called "transformation problem" inherent to Marxist theory.

³ The author thanks Xiao HAN, currently working on literary representations of primitive accumulation and the housing crisis in contemporary China for bringing this passage to his attention.

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