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## How to use *Lire le Capital*\*

Jacques Rancière

The text which follows is taken from the collective work *Lire le Capital*, a theoretical enterprise whose reactionary political foundations I have tried to indicate elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Its present publication should, in the first place, allow one to indicate the distortions which a Marxian text had to undergo in 1965 in order to constitute a guarantee of the scientific problematic of Althusserism—and to enable one thereby to question the *political* basis of this problematic.

The mode of demonstration employed in my text may be summed up as follows. The criticism carried out in the *Manuscripts* involves a certain criticism of the economic object. It is this position which is destroyed by the criticism of *Capital*: the analysis of the commodity destroys the very object/product from which the criticism of the *Manuscripts* stems. The explicit criticism of political economy in *Capital* is thus an implicit criticism of the anthropological critique at work in the 1844 *Manuscripts*. As for the difficulties sometimes presented by the text of *Capital* in carrying out this function, these are to be attributed to the disparity between that which Marx 'produces' and the awareness he has of it. A perfectly adjusted device by which all the questions that can be put to a text are always referred only to the relation of a discourse with its 'object', according to the two modalities of its thought and its non-thought: the relation of the economy to an object (labour) in which the absence of another object (labour power) is read; the relation of the 1844 *Manuscripts* to political economy in which the criticism is affected in turn by the non-thought of the shift between its object and the unthought of that object; the displacement of the object explicitly criticised by *Capital* to its implicit object; the disparity between the new theoretical object produced by Marx (the *representation* of the relations of production) and the non-thought of that object. A game of breaks, shifts and substitutions, in which the exterior of a text never appears except as its unthought, which is always the thought of another text. The indefinite space of a commentary, which ceaselessly extracts the unsaid from the said, and finds in their difference the effectivity of another non-said, is

opened by that break which is merely the old disparity between awareness and self-awareness. The operation thus comes down to criticising the awareness which Marx had of his theoretical production in the name of *another consciousness* whose privilege is never for a moment questioned.

This is a history whose moral may be stated thus: there is no *implicit* criticism. In as much as a critical discourse is in effect a practice aimed at transforming the awareness of an object, it is essential for it that the object be clear. The notion of implicit criticism indicates precisely the movement of critical discourse into the space of commentary, which bases the possibility of its iteration only on the suppression of the *strategic* dimension of discourse: that dimension in which the relation of a discourse to its object involves the relation to its social function, i.e. to the relations maintained with it by the practices and forms of expression of classes in conflict. This is the dimension in which there appears the *speech function* of discourse—the effects it aims to produce and the effects produced on it, not by the class struggle in general but by its *being put into forms of discourse*, forms in which are articulated the practices of opposed classes. Thus there are the effects on the discourse of the *1844 Manuscripts* or of *Capital* of discursive forms (reports by police commissioners or public attorneys, inquiries by doctors and economists, sermons, electoral speeches, etc.) in which the bourgeoisie thinks (i.e. thinks-in-order-to-repress) the proletariat. But there is also the resonance in their text of discursive forms in which the proletariat thinks itself—to suppress: from voices in the workshop, rumours in the streets, market-places and labour-exchanges, to the leading ideas of working-class insurrection, by way of the educated forms of working-class literature or the popular forms of street songs. Traces of discourse from above or echoes of voices from below indicate the starting-point from which a critical discourse may be questioned: where the aims of speech are the aims of power. Instead of which, the declared purpose of the Althusserian concept of problematic (that of taking account of the relation of objects to objectives, of reflecting in the position of a theoretical object the conditions of that position) is found denied in practice by a mode of reading enclosed within the relation of a discourse to its object, only to bring up to the surface from this dual relation, the sign of an unthought (in the break of the discourse) which represents its exterior. For this reason the exterior never intrudes in its positive form, but always appears in the form of a *deficiency*, made good by the commentary to the interior of the dual relation.

The effects of misunderstanding produced by this 'symptomatic' reading appear clearly in my analysis of fetishism. According to this analysis, the manifestation/dissimulation of production relations,

which reduces the economic object to a phantom and the subject to the functioning of illusion, constitutes a positive refutation of any talk about alienation. I will not stress here the political significance of such a reading which reduces bourgeois and workers to the same status as *agents of production*, inevitably mystified by their very practice as agents. (The proposition, in short, that false ideas come from social practice!) Nor will I emphasise the texts in *Capital* which contradict this proposition, notably those which refer us to that 'capitalist lair' where illusions vanish, where bourgeois and workers, in their everyday confrontation, see only too well what increases the value of commodities: unpaid labour. In Volume I the movement which returns the illusions of circulation to the painful truths of the working-day—and thence to the constitution of capitalist relations of production—is clear enough. But I do want to hold on to the one theoretical device in which I claimed to read the shifts from the ideological to the scientific. For by what miracle did the text of *Capital* present the space in which might be read the shifts and divergences which constitute the effects of the break? How else, if not because the 'ideological' discourse of the *Manuscripts* and the 'scientific' discourse of *Capital* reflect the same theoretical principle: the principle which posits that *the constitution of an object and the constitution of its illusion* are one and the same process? Here is a mechanism which hides the very conditions in which the relations of production are differentially perceived by agents who are agents of production only in so far as they are at the same time agents in the class struggle. We have indeed to deal with a displacement of the place and status of illusion, but one which does not at all affect its concept: the identification of the conditions of the position of an object with the conditions of its thought was simply reversed. The same principle is at work throughout all the re-organisations of Marx's problematic. In the early texts the speculative principle (the illusion of objectivity) intensifies the process of alienation (the loss of the subject in its object). In *The German Ideology* the division of labour is at once the principle of the class struggle and that of the discourse of ideologues which only intensifies its own separation from reality in the abstraction of its object. In *Capital* the discourse of illusion is no longer the product of a separation, but always the simple intensification of a process of illusion which is at the same time the process of constituting reality. The position of science is thus located by the very movement which poses critical discourse.

And so it is only fair that Etienne Balibar, in the article already mentioned, should criticise the practice by which *Lire le Capital* made of fetishism the principle of a theory of ideology having the concept of subject as its scientific object. But his analysis seems to

end up as nothing more than a rejection of fetishism for belonging to the 'bad side' of the break, as a new dividing line separating the content of scientific practice from ideological discourse about science. By this indefinite drawing back of the dividing line between the ideological and the scientific, one invariably conjures away the political knot which is precisely what defines the *position of science*. In *Capital* this is the position whose essential aim is to replace the mechanism of ideology at the heart of reality itself, a mechanism which *The German Ideology* had located only in its petty-bourgeois margin. The texts of 1845–1847 contrasted the clarity of the classes directly engaged in struggle on the one hand, with the illusions of the petty-bourgeoisie on the other. Science was the science of a real world whose surface was without depth, in which ideology represented mere excrescence. If *Capital*, in direct contrast, connected the function of science to the necessity of uncovering the real movement of production within the reality as perceived by its agents, then it did so in response to a political break: the defeat of the proletariat in the revolution of 1848. There where revolutionary explosion and the direct confrontation of classes announced the appearance of the naked truth of history, there too was played out the strange tragi-comedy of *political representation*: betrayal of the proletariat by fake representatives like the Montagnards of '93, the 'buffoonery' of universal suffrage at the advent of Louis-Napoleon; the republic, deceiving and deceived, places at the centre of revolutionary political thinking the entire question of political representation. This movement, which began in the dungeon of Vincennes, from where Blanqui addressed the Banquet of Socialist Workers in an astonishing text on the '48 parody of '93,<sup>3</sup> became, through successive defeats and proscriptions, the very axis for the re-organisation of the revolutionary problematic.

It is easy to recognise the effect of 1848 on Marx's problematic: on the one hand, the work of science received an autonomy (inconceivable for the earlier critical discourse) from the political analysis of 1850 which now indicated that the retreat of the economic crisis made it inevitable that the tide of revolution too would recede—the movement of science was no longer synchronised to an historical movement of revelation. On the other hand, the relation among the three terms science, reality and illusion was overturned by the lesson of the extraordinary pantomime of 1848—when by the mirage of representation each class found itself the immediate concern of its neighbour, when men of power wore the costumes of a different political play in order to represent interests directly opposed to those they were supposed to represent, when universal suffrage found its expression in 'an undecipherable hieroglyphic for the understanding of the civilised'.<sup>7</sup> The divergence

is no longer one between *reality* and the illusions of ideologues, but between a scene whose reality is that of representation and the device which sustains it. It was politics which imposed this shift by which the mechanism of illusion, tucked into *The German Ideology*, was again displayed. *The Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire* bear witness to this: in them the buffooneries of representation are analysed in terms of religious fantasy, and Louis-Napoleon, representing the small peasants, replays (in a shift which transforms the concepts of the game) the Feuerbachian fable of the supreme being, who is raised above men by the very egoism which prevents the human race from posing itself as such. This political rupture, which ploughed up the space of reality, imposed a different mode of reading the text of bourgeois economic science. In this new reading, the latter is no longer a darkened mirror to be made clear by a critical operation which makes it declare all there is to say, but a rewriting (in the space of a specific rationality) of the fantastic writing of the commodity—whose principle is produced *elsewhere*. Commodity fetishism does not reproduce man's alienation, nor does it produce its critique: it is the class struggle which separates *science* and *revelation*.

This was, however, an unsecured break, and one that was ceaselessly denied in the text of *Capital* by its formulation. Here, indeed, was a strange kind of dissimulation which was always expressed as mere inversion—no more than a mirror, in fact, and not a very distorting one at that, which only stood everything on its head. Well? An ideological survival? A reproduction in the relationship to itself of the science of the relationship of ideology to its object? A diversion of concepts by the words in which the constraints of 'theoretical production' requires them to be expressed? In short: is this a question of elements foreign to the class of scientific concepts? How to get rid of them?

Perhaps, following a classic displacement, one may ask: why *should* one get rid of them? This question is clearly stated in the first chapter of *Capital* where Marx, in giving an account of fetishism, compares the capitalist form of the distribution of social labour time with other social forms. The last of these variations is as follows:

Let us now picture to ourselves, by way of change, a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour—power of the community. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are here repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual. . . . The social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to

its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution.<sup>8</sup> The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature. The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.<sup>9</sup>

Freely associated men, the clarity of social relations . . . so much ideology in the frontispiece of science! So long as one does not prefer to close one's eyes, one will have no difficulty here in penetrating the 'secret' of fetishism. Surely this is a very bad theory of ideology, this representation of the self-deception of production relations which masks the conditions for the formation of correct ideas as those of false ideas? But in any case fetishism is *not at all* a theory of ideology (such a theory is an object not of Marx's discourse but of a reading of Marx) but the theoretical representative of a leading idea in which are concentrated the dreams of fighting proletarians: the association of free producers, a proletarian dream put to the test a thousand times since that autumn of 1833 when the striking tailors of Paris tried to be their own masters. Fetishism represents *in theory*, i.e. in terms of the *conditions of understanding* (and of misunderstanding), that other world borne by the proletarian struggle, which makes its object thinkable.<sup>10</sup> It was from this point, i.e. the 'ideological' representation of the absolute visibility of production relations, that the invisible received its status in science. From this point it was possible to state the functioning of capitalist production relations and its science became possible.<sup>11</sup> This was certainly ideology—dreams of freely associating producers, of the abolition of money, of simple workers seizing the administrative machine, of cooks directing state affairs. It had to be so: the impurity of science is due not only to the 'survivals' of older philosophies but to its very principle. The idea of revolution is fairly ideological. And surely if the commodity, which illustrates the phantasmagorias of value, proves to be clothing, then the working tailors (strikers of Paris, militants of the League of the Just, the fraternal tailors of Clichy) have something to do with it—as have also those Lyons silk workers who wove finery for the rich together with the winding sheets of the old world.

The concept of fetishism thus indicates a historical rupture in a dual movement: on the one hand, the movement from the representation to the science of its location, from the perception of

production agents (i.e. proletarians) to the science of their blindness; on the other hand the movement which related this science to an image of the future borne by the workers' struggle. This was an appeal from the visible of perception to the invisible of science and from that invisible to the representation of *visibility* which its extension gives to it. In this double return is marked the double genealogy of the concept (from the side of bourgeois philosophy and that of the class struggle) in which is reflected also the double political relationship of Marx with the workers in their struggle: impatience at those Parisian workers, self-educated and moralising, infatuated with forming associations, popular banks and co-operative kitchens—and admiration for those same workers, climbing to assault the skies and to seize the state machine.

One can easily see from this how the concept may be twisted either towards the sentimentality of alienation or towards the pedantry of science. My reading stood on this little stage in which the criticism of 'humanism' or of 'the idealist theory of the subject' (poor scarecrows for theoretical sparrows) was concerned entirely with the scientific portrayal of fetishism—i.e. with the representation of a world of agents enclosed within illusion by which alone they participated in the mechanism of capitalist production. It is not enough to say about this representation that it was the self-justification of a work of commentary clothed with the prestige of 'Science'. Because it does not only relate to the repressive attitude of 'science' towards the inevitably 'ideological' voices of rebels and the oppressed, but relates, more profoundly still, to the paranoid representations of power. That the spontaneous perception and speech of the agents of production must be the result of a *machination* of production relations (i.e. absent in reality) expresses, in discursive forms appropriate to philosophy, the paranoid setting of power—and in particular of 'proletarian' (revisionist) power—according to which every spontaneous expression by these agents is the result of machination from outside. The agents of production are necessarily within the illusion, proclaims my text. 'Spontaneity does not exist,' proclaims the CGT in a comment on the assassination of Pierre Overney. This is where the discourse of science meets 'proletarian' power and the bosses' militias.<sup>12</sup>

*Translated by Tanya Asad*



## Notes

\* This introduction is adapted by Rancière from a text published in *Les Temps Modernes*, Nov. 1973.

1. cf. J. Rancière, *La leçon d'Althusser*, Paris (Gallimard), 1974, and, in English, 'On the Theory of Ideology (the Politics of Althusser)', *Radical Philosophy*, 7, Spring, 1974.

2. E. Balibar, 'Self-Criticism: An Answer to Questions from Theoretical Practice', *Theoretical Practice*, 7/8, January 1973.

3. *Banquet des Travailleurs Socialistes*, Paris, 1849.

4. *Almanach de l'exil*, London, 1958.

5. This text, written at Belle-Ile in 1852 was published together with other unpublished pieces of Blanqui in *La Révolution de 1848, 1925*, Vol. XII, p. 552.

6. *La législation directe par le peuple et la véritable démocratie*, Paris, 1850.

7. *The Class Struggle in France*, Moscow, 1960, p. 63.

8. *Capital*, Moscow, 1961, pp. 78–79.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 79–80.

10. To speak here of what 'fetishism' represents may lead to ambiguity. Of course I do not intend to say that the fetishisation of the relations of production represents the aspirations of proletarians, but rather that the theory of fetishism, as a theory of *misunderstanding*, shows, albeit inversely, the workers struggle and its ideal (the association of free workers) as the condition of the possibility of science. The ambiguity of the formulation brings us back perhaps to a displacement of the reading: instead of trying to see a *positive theory of social illusion* (Lukacsian reification, the Althusserian theory of ideology, etc.) should one not rather see there the indication by Marxist 'science' of its conditions of possibility—i.e. the emblem of a science rather than the concept of its object?

11. One should say more precisely that the possibility of the science of *Capital* comes from two points of intelligibility, both posed by the proletarian struggle: the 'actual' of the working day and the wages-struggle, which allows the concept of *surplus-value* to be stated, and the 'imaginary' of the association of free producers represented in the concept of fetishism. A double point—the wages-struggle and the abolition of wage-labour, connected to each other by the practices of struggle like those of the workshops of striking tailors and shoe-makers of Paris in 1833. To think of surplus-value as an object of science while rejecting fetishism as ideology, is to postulate wage-labour but not its abolition, to establish a certain science that corresponds to a certain politics—the science and politics of class struggle reduced to a conflict of economic interests, which can always be accommodated by an arrangement while waiting for it to be finally resolved by the 'collectivisation of the means of production'. To get rid of fetishism by relegating it to 'ideology' is to carry out a process of reading strictly corresponding to the elucidation which recently led the CGT to drop any reference in their statutes to 'the abolition of wage-labour'.

12. Pierre Overney: a young Maoist worker, killed by a member of the Renault factory police in February, 1972. The CGT and the PCF poured out insult and slander over his corpse.

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