

The Substance of Capital: Appearance *qua* Expression

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Abstract: Despite the centrality of ideology critique in the works of Louis Althusser and his students, the Marxian concept of “appearance” as constitutive of the necessary obfuscation of social modes of exchange has not been sufficiently explicated. Furthermore, perceived incompatibility between ideology and commodity fetishism by this group of philosophers has amounted to a critical lacuna in the shape of a materialist theory of the value-form. This essay articulates the concept of appearance as framed by Gilles Deleuze’s concept of expression in an attempt to foreground the structuring relations that immanently determine capital, appearance, and value. By carefully reformulating Marx’s value-form theory through the rationalist metaphysics of Baruch Spinoza, this essay endeavors to produce a value-form theory compatible with the Spinozist Marxist tradition.

Keywords: Althusser, Spinoza, Deleuze, appearance, commodity fetishism, value

I. Introduction

The concept of appearance appears in the very first sentence of Karl Marx’s *Capital, Volume I*: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as ‘an immense collection of commodities.’”¹ Appearance is arguably the lynchpin which concatenates capital’s potential and actual manifestations—appearance, and specifically the appearance of value, is the very attribute through which capital articulates itself, and which comprises the essential substrate of which capital consists. In the anticipatory first sentence of *Capital* Marx is clear

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 125.

that capital can be understood as nothing more or less than the appearance of the material world *qua* value. Given that Marx centers—albeit understatedly—the concept of appearance in his analysis of political economy, it stands to reason that this matter warrants further investigation. In what follows, I articulate the concept of appearance in Marx as understood through Gilles Deleuze’s concept of expression.² I superimpose these concepts in an attempt to foreground the immanence and necessity of appearance to the capitalist mode of production, through which I conduct a reading of Marx through the materialist philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. This undertaking dispels the misunderstanding of value as the mere representation of capital, maps the relationships of necessity that immanently determine capital, appearance, and value, and attempts to reconcile divided theoretical discourses on the relative compatibility of Althusser’s conception of ideology *with* Marx’s exposition of commodity fetishism. It is my hope that this will, in turn, allow us to produce a value-form theory compatible with the Spinozist Marxist tradition.^{3 4}

II. The Appearance of Value

In his introduction to the fourth edition of *Capital*, Ernest Mandel underscores the need for an understanding of appearance as it obtains to a rigorous inquiry of the capitalist mode of production. Mandel does not

2 For the purposes of this essay, whenever I refer to “expression” and its permutations—such as “expressive character,” “expressive view,” “expressive triad”—I am referring to Deleuze’s exposition of the concept. I do not refer to a concept of expression as derived from Leibniz’s expressive totality [*totalité expressive*], which forms the basis of Althusser’s critique of expressive or teleological causality.

3 I find this second contribution particularly urgent given the discursive dominance of Neue Marx-Lektüre formulations of value-form theory, and particularly the notoriety and contributions of Helmut Reichelt, Hans-Georg Backhaus, and Michael Heinrich, the latter of whose forthcoming English translation of *The Science of Value (Die Wissenschaft vom Wert)*, Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 1991) has been eagerly awaited.

4 For a rigorous overview of the foundations of Spinozist Marxism, see Cesare Casarino’s “Marx Before Spinoza: Notes Towards an Investigation” in *Spinoza Now* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

take appearance as mere illusion, but as related *essentially* to the determining logic of capital:

To explain the capitalist mode of production in its totality it is wholly insufficient to understand simply the ‘basic essence,’ the ‘law of value.’ It is necessary to integrate ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’ through all their intermediate mediating links, to explain how and why a given ‘essence’ appears in given concrete forms and not in others. For these ‘appearances’ themselves are neither *accidental* nor *self-evident*. They pose problems, they have to be explained in their turn, and this very explanation helps to pierce through new layers of mystery and brings us again nearer to a full understanding of the specific form of economic organization which we want to understand.⁵

Mandel centers appearance as fundamentally imbricated with capital, each form of appearance constituting an entry-point into more complex analyses of the capitalist mode of production. And while he does not name representation in so many words, Mandel cautions against accepting appearances simply at face value, “without looking for the basic forces and contradictions which [appearances] tend to hide from the superficial and empiricist observer.”⁶ Furthermore, Mandel disclaims that this is not a question of theoretical complexity: in fact, “the simplest forms of appearance of the ‘economic categories’... are often also their primitive, that is their original, form.”⁷ An analysis of appearance in its simplest, earliest form—the commodity—should suffice in demonstrating appearance’s import.

5 Marx, *Capital*, 20, emphasis mine.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 22.

Using Mandel's introduction to frame our analysis of appearance *qua* value, some assumptions must be established. In what follows, I understand forms of value—illustrated most clearly by the commodity-form—as forms of appearance. This commensurability is derived from Marx's own equivalence of the terms: for example, he understands the “simple form of value of the commodity” as “the simple form of *appearance* of the opposition between use-value and value which is contained in the commodity.”⁸ Furthermore, we must begin our analysis from the assumption that the contradiction presented by the commodity as a “form for two contents”—use-value and exchange-value—is an *apparent* contradiction rather than a *real* one. As Pierre Macherey suggests, the appearance of the commodity as a form for two contents is itself merely the *appearance* of a formal contradiction, which must be suppressed in order to move beyond it.^{9 10} These assumptions allow us to deduce from Marx's exposition of commodity fetishism how it is, formally speaking, that appearances prevent us from recognizing the production of social relations of labor and exchange in the process of valorization.

I must also address the misconception that appearances of value are representational. By this I mean to explicate the grounds for the mistaken understanding of value's appearances as *purely* representational, or otherwise ‘standing in’ for value, which is deemed unrepresentable. Appearance as mere representation renders forms of value *imaginary* and obscures that appearances are *essential* to the functioning of capital, that they are constituted by and are constitutive of its logic and movement. The appearance of value in the commodity-form or money-form,

8 Ibid., 153, emphasis mine.

9 Pierre Macherey, “On the Process of Exposition of *Capital* (The Work of Concepts),” *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (New York: Verso, 2015), 194-6.

10 “In order to know the nature of value (to understand that it is not something arbitrary, as it shows itself in the relation), it is necessary to *emerge from appearances*, to reject the form of appearance of value in order to examine its content, which is ‘distinct from its various expressions,’ the empirical models. Behind the ‘two things’ that form the immediate matter of the relation [of exchange], a third must be sought, ‘why by itself is neither the one nor the other’: the structure of this relation.” (Macherey, “On the Process of Exposition of *Capital* (The Work of Concepts),” 201).

depending on the circumstances, is no less ‘real’ because these appearances are determined by the movement of the exchange-relation $M-C-M'$ —that is, it would be absurd to think these forms of value as arbitrary to the point of unreality—rather, these forms, as appearances of value, are heterogenous concrete expressions of the essence of the capitalist mode of production (expressions which include, *intrinsically*, the propensity for change). This is Marx’s own contention in his analysis of the money-form of the commodity and the mistaken proclivity of writers in the 18th century to reduce appearance to representation:

The process of exchange gives to the commodity which it has converted into money not its *value* but its specific *value-form*. Confusion between these two attributes has misled some writers into maintaining that the value of gold and silver is imaginary. The fact that money can, in certain functions, be replaced by mere symbols of itself, gave rise to another mistaken notion, that it is itself a mere symbol.¹¹

The conflation of value and value-form in the money-form of the commodity leads the undiscerning reader to conclude that since value only appears in the process of exchange, it is purely imaginary and does not have *material* existence. However, this has the effect of negating the material factor of value, that is, of social relations of labor and exchange that are enabled by the commodity. That the money-form of value can in turn be replaced by representations of itself—that gold can be replaced by paper currency as the universal equivalent—sends the reader further down the misconceived rabbit hole that the money-form is a mere representation, with no necessary relation to value. This obscures the

11 Ibid., 184-5, emphasis mine.

centrality of appearance to capital *qua* value, reducing it to a superficial happenstance of the capitalist mode of production.¹²

The understanding of representation as such a relationship of externality has been glossed by Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, and particularly in relation to the intrinsic quality of expression (which I shall return to later in this essay). He argues that “by itself, representation is given up to an extrinsic relation of resemblance or similitude only,” that there can only be an inadequate mimesis of reality through its representation.¹³ Representation can always be anything other than itself. It is contingent rather than necessary—representations can be replaced with others, signs are only related arbitrarily to reality, and there contains nothing in the representation that is essentially related to that which is being represented. This is in direct contradiction with Marx’s description of the money-form, as “a measure of value [which] is the *necessary* form of appearance for the measure of value which is immanent in commodities, namely labor-time.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the operative clause “by itself” suggests that Deleuze believes there is another understanding of appearance—one that *accompanies* its representational understanding—which produces a more rigorous exposition of appearance. Consequently, to think of appearance as mere representation is to render it contingent in the capitalist mode of production, against Mandel’s contention that it drives its movement. To understand appearance as purely representational would be to obscure the determining machinations of appearance *qua* value.

12 I have attempted in this essay to eschew the usage of language or metaphors of depth with respect to the concept of expression because I do not wish to suggest that expression is based on relationships of interiority and exteriority. The expression of the essence of the capitalist mode of production in the value-form does not mean that the value-form is a container to be filled with the content of capital’s essence. However, in this sentence I allude to the *superficiality* of a purely representative understanding of the value form in order to impress the error in taking such necessary appearances of value as arbitrary representational signifiers for the “true” content of value.

13 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 145.

14 Marx, *Capital*, 188.

Given this, I turn to the well-known section on the fetishism of the commodity in order to articulate in clearer terms what Marx means by the concept of appearance. Appearance is a form of the expression of value: that is, a given thing begins to function as an appearance just as soon as it is constituted as having exchange-value. The “enigmatic character of the product of labor,” for example, emerges only when it “assumes the form of a commodity... [the enigma] arises from this form itself.”¹⁵ That process which transforms a mere object into a commodity, which in turn appears to take on a “mystical character,” is precisely one of valorization.¹⁶ Given that the appearance of the world as a series of values is central to the movement of the capitalist mode of production, as soon as something is valorized, it begins to function in such a manner that broadens, deepens, or otherwise enhances the legitimacy and power of this mode. In the case of the commodity, appearance obscures from the worker that her social labor takes on an objective quality in the commodity-form, obscuring the equation by which her own activity is shown to be integral to the process of valorization:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.¹⁷

This alienation of the worker effected through the appearance of the product of her labor as *objectively* valuable hides the social character of labor and the processes of expropriation that extract labor-power from her. She is unable to rehabilitate the object of her labor as being one of her own making, and consequently engages in market exchange so as to obtain

15 Ibid., 164.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 164-5.

commodities that seem in and of themselves valuable. In this way, the valorization of the object of labor into a commodity, an appearance of value, encourages the stimulation and growth of capital.

The fetishism of the commodity also provides an account of the obfuscation enacted by a representational understanding of the commodity-form. This fetishism itself can be read as a direct consequence of a purely representational understanding of the commodity-form, which produces commodities in the human mind as “autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own,” transforming the social relation between men into “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”¹⁸ Because men do not take the commodity as the crystallization of social relations of labor—because they do not understand the process of valorization that transforms the objects of their labor into appearances which express the essence of capital—they try to make sense of the commodity as a *representation* of the human labor expended to create it. Men attempt to decipher the “social hieroglyphic” of the commodity-form—its function as standing in for and symbolizing social exchange—without realizing that it is not merely a glyph representing their labor, but their labor itself, now estranged from them through the process of valorization.¹⁹ The objective quality of the commodity *qua* representation obscures that these commodities are products of human labor. And further, when human beings take the commodity in terms of the universal equivalent—the money-form—this only further alienates the worker from the social dimension of valorization, and the commodity now appears as an object whose worth is totally contingent upon and dictated by fluctuations of the market. That the “belated scientific discovery that the products of labor... are merely the material *expressions* of the human labor expended to produce them... but by no means banishes [their] semblance

18 Ibid., 165.

19 Ibid., 167.

of objectivity” only demonstrates the strength of the necessary illusion enabled by representational readings of the commodity-form.²⁰

From this exegesis it is clear that Marx’s concept of appearance as introduced in *Capital* requires more rigorous theoretical development, development that is urgently needed in order to anatomize the constitutive elements of the capitalist mode of production. This is especially significant since, as Kiarina Kordela has pointed out, “the key in Marx’s methodology regarding commodity fetishism is that he treated this *appearing* not just as an error to be rectified but as constitutive of reality and being.”²¹²² In order to demonstrate appearance’s constitutive character, I turn to Deleuze’s concept of expression.

III. An Immanent Theory of Representation

Cesare Casarino has characterized Deleuze’s *Expressionism in Philosophy* as “at once a radical critique of and as radical alternative to representation intended in its specifically Platonic—that is to say, mimetic—determination.”²³ This characterization guides my reading of Deleuze’s concept of expression as an alternative to representation in that I understand the latter’s representational, contingent character counterposed with the former’s necessary, essential one. Deleuze derives the concept of expression from Spinoza’s *Ethics*, in which expression is the modality through which the world unfolds from-and-with substance. In its first iteration, expression presents us with a “triad” through which we can distinguish the relationships between substance, attribute, and essence: “substance expresses itself, attributes are expressions, and

20 Ibid.

21 Kiarina Kordela, *Epistemology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan: The (Bio)Power of Structure* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 25.

22 For an overview of and responses to Kordela’s latest book, see “Forum on *Epistemology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan: The (Bio)Power of Structure*” in *Cultural Critique* 112 (Summer), 2021.

23 Cesare Casarino, “The Expression of Time (Spinoza, Deleuze, Cinema),” *Qui Parle* 27:1 (June): 7.

essence is expressed.”²⁴ However, the triad does not end in drawing the distinction between substance, attribute, and essence.²⁵ Deleuze then presents us with a triad in which attributes express themselves, essence is expression, and modes are expressed. Expression is turtles all the way down—insofar as expression inheres in Spinoza’s substance, as far as its essence is existence (existence *qua* attributes, modes, and so on), expression is in the very nature of substance, and its triads recur. The necessity of this concept arises from the nature of Spinoza’s metaphysics of immanence, that is, it becomes necessary to be able to distinguish between individual things in an ontology of relation in which all things are always already concatenated with and immanently related to one another. Because the world is conceived as one continuous expanse of substance, Deleuze attempts to account for how specific determinations of substance appear to us as distinct from one another, even though they are comprised of one and the same substance. On the level of modal existence, this allows us to differentiate between individual modes without resorting to mere representation of these modes.²⁶ Expression is Deleuze’s proposition for an immanent theory of modal distinction.

Whereas representation is “dualistic by definition”—the object and its corresponding representational image—expression is ‘essentially triadic.’²⁷ Expression moves in a tripartite constellation of terms: that

24 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 27.

25 By substance Spinoza understands that “which is in itself and is conceived through itself... an absolutely infinite entity... consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence” (*Ethics*, I D3/D6). By attribute, he understands that “which intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence” (*Ethics*, I D4). By essence, he understands that “which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily negated; or that without which a thing can neither exist nor be conceived, and conversely that which can neither exist nor be conceived without the thing” (*Ethics*, II D2). For a glossary of important concepts deployed by Spinoza, see Gilles Deleuze’s “Index of the Main Concepts of the *Ethics*” in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988).

26 By mode Spinoza understands “the affections of substance, or, that which is in something else, through which it is also conceived” (*Ethics*, I D5), that is, as an individual thing that cannot exist or be perceived without substance.

27 Deleuze in Cesare Casarino, “The Expression of Time (Spinoza, Deleuze, Cinema),” 7.

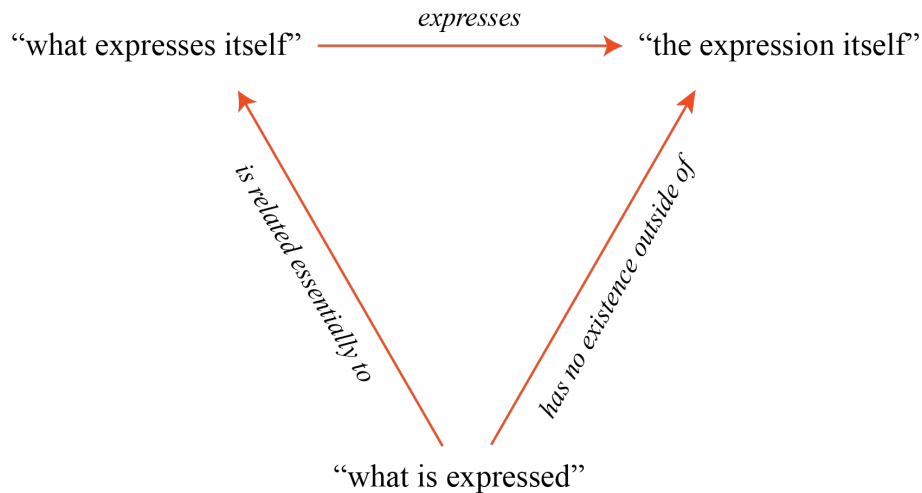
which expresses, the expression itself, and that which is expressed. Yet, the relationships between these terms are not representational, they are not “mimetic relations” for “there is no resemblance in expression.”²⁸ The determining function of expression is not premised on the ability of expression to present a likeness of the thing being expressed. Rather, expression reveals the essential relationship between that which expresses and what is expressed. Deleuze describes the relationships in this expressive triad as follows:

we must distinguish what expresses itself, the expression itself, and what is expressed. The paradox is that “what is expressed” *has no existence* outside its expression, yet bears no resemblance to it, but relates *essentially* to what expresses itself as distinct from the expression itself.²⁹

The relationship between what expresses itself and the expression is the simplest of the three: that which expresses itself, expresses itself in the expression. The relationship between what expresses itself and what is expressed is, however, one of essence—that which is expressed is related *essentially* to that which expresses, is intrinsic to that which expresses. Conversely, there is no essential relation between that which is expressed and the expression itself. Instead, these terms are related *existentially*—that is, that which is expressed cannot exist without the expression. These relationships are demonstrated in the following illustration, for clarity:

28 Ibid.

29 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 333.



These relationships of essence and existence are what I have referred to as the “intrinsic” relationships of expression, in opposition to the “extrinsic” relationship of representation, where there can only be an external correspondence between an object and its representation.³⁰

Casarino has given a rigorous account of the ways in which expression constitutes a “particularly effective strategy for conducting a ferocious yet redemptive critique of representation.”³¹ His contention is that expression should not be thought of as a replacement for representation—for representations persist regardless of how we theorize against them, and are necessary accompaniments to how we understand the world—but as an attempt to rethink a figuration of representation by “refounding it on nonmimetic grounds.”³² What Casarino exposes in this account of Deleuze is a paradigm in which objects can be marked and defined by their “immanent power [puissance],” that is to say, its intrinsic and unrepresentable essence.³³ This paradigm therefore accounts for the

30 By “intrinsic” I do not mean “internal”—see footnote 12. What Deleuze’s conceptualization of expression reveals is the inadequacy of metaphors of depth in explicating relations of expression.

31 Cesare Casarino, “The Expression of Time (Spinoza, Deleuze, Cinema),” 8.

32 Ibid.

33 Here, essence may also be understood as the object’s *power*, since for Spinoza it is in the essence (or power) of modes to be different than they are.

propensity of a given object to *change*, to become other than itself, thus releasing it from the static clutches of mimesis.³⁴ Expression presents an object “in its capacity to be other than itself, in its potential to be different from what it is”.³⁵ I derive that expression is adequate to the study of appearance from Casarino’s assertion that “mimesis... is what representation becomes when alienated from (its) expression.”³⁶ Expression allows us to chart the relationships of *necessity* between given appearances of value, understand these appearances as containing the potential to be other than they appear in a given moment—to take on a whole host of appearances of valorization—and to move *beyond* an ideological reading of these appearances as mere representations of value, but as expressions of capital. In order for this to become clearer, the concepts of appearance and expression must be directly superimposed. In what follows I will trace the logic of Deleuze’s expression through appearance as it functions in Marx’s *Capital*.

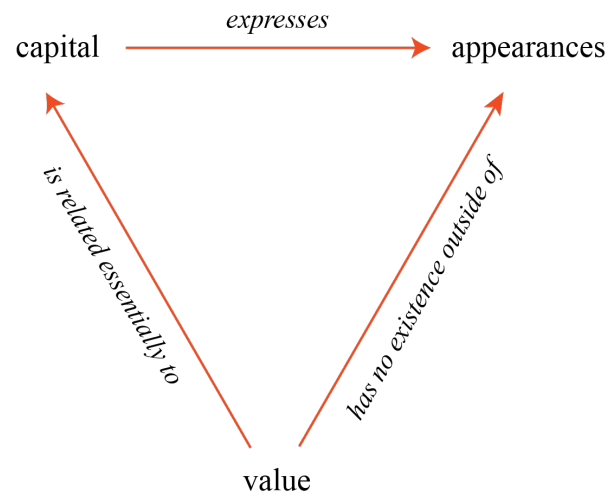
IV. Appearance *qua* Expression

With Deleuze’s notion of expression in mind, I return to *Capital* in order to demonstrate how it is that appearance expresses the essence of capital. For clarity, the relationships between capital, appearance, and value have been replaced in the above graphic of Deleuze’s expressive triad:

34 Cesare Casarino, “The Expression of Time (Spinoza, Deleuze, Cinema),” 9.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.



This superimposition takes capital in the structural locus of “what expresses itself,” appearances in place of “the expression itself,” and value in place of “what is expressed.” What I suggest is precisely that value, as related essentially to and in being constitutive of capital, has no existence outside of appearances, which are the expression of capital itself.³⁷ Take the case of the commodity as appearance, which has thus far been our object of analysis. We know from Marx’s own explication that value is not physically contained in the commodity-form, for:

Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value.³⁸

³⁷ Recall Spinoza’s definition of essence, as that “which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily negated; or that without which a thing can neither exist nor be conceived, and conversely that which can neither exist nor be conceived without the thing” (*Ethics*, II D2).

³⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 138.

Value is not a physical quantity, it cannot be contained in the “sensuous objectivity” of the commodity. Even Aristotle struggled to produce a definition of value, and he in fact contends that such a thing “cannot exist.”³⁹⁴⁰ While a linen coat might be thought of as a “bearer of value,” this property never explicitly shows itself, “even when the coat is at its most threadbare.”⁴¹ Value instead manifests in the exchange of commodities, that is, “in the social relation between commodity and commodity.”⁴² Consequently, it is reasonable to say that value does not exist outside of its appearance in the commodity-form, which is itself only an appearance in the social act of exchange—“the natural form of the commodity *becomes* its value-form” when exchanged.⁴³

From this we can derive that value both constitutes and is constituted by the essence of capital. In so far as the capitalist mode of production involves continuous processes of valorization and reinvestment towards the production of ever more surplus value, it can be said that valorization is the essence of the capitalist mode of production. Since Marx defines capital as “self-valorizing value,” to be grasped only as a movement, take for example the transformation of money in the form of circulation M-C-M'.⁴⁴ Marx describes this movement as one that transforms money “into capital, becomes capital, and from the point of view of its function, already is capital.”⁴⁵ Money is exchanged for commodities in this movement, which are in turn sold for money,

39 Ibid., 151.

40 Marx contends that Aristotle would not have been able to produce this concept seeing as “Greek society was founded on the labor of slaves, [and] hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labor-powers” (*Capital*, 152). It is only with the emergence of the capitalist mode of production in which men are free to sell their labor that a concept of value can be produced.

41 Ibid., 143.

42 Ibid., 139.

43 Ibid., 148, emphasis mine.

44 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume II* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 185.

45 Ibid., 248.

generating surplus value. This is a process of valorization, in which the commodity appears—fleetingly—as the appearance of value: “the value originally advanced... increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value, or is valorized.”⁴⁶ In short, valorization yields capital. However, this does not explain how valorization constitutes the very essence of the capitalist mode of production. For this we must consider the M-C-M’ movement in its entirety, as it plays out in the circulation of commodities through the social practices of exchange:

The simple circulation of commodities—selling in order to buy—is a means to a final goal which lies outside circulation, namely the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of needs. As against this, the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless.⁴⁷

The single movement M-C-M’, when replicated endlessly in “constantly renewed movement,” ensures the limitless production of surplus value and transformation of value into capital. This extension of M-C-M’ for the achievement of this goal—a goal “which lies outside circulation.... [and] is an end in itself”—is precisely the essence of the capitalist mode of production, which seeks to propagate itself infinitely.⁴⁸ That is, the valorization of M-C-M’ extended *ad infinitum* is the very essence of capital. Value is related *essentially* to capital.

It remains to be explained how the commodity, as an appearance of value, is the expression of capital. This comes into view in the same movement M-C-M’, in which the commodity appears as a mediating term

46 Ibid., 252.

47 Ibid., 253.

48 Ibid.

in the process of valorization. In the commodity-form inheres the property of value to increase itself in the capitalist mode of production. That is, it is in the changing price of the commodity that we see valorization come to pass. Capital *expresses* its essence—value—in the *expression* of appearance—the commodity. However, it must be noted that money, too, is an appearance of value, and consequently an expression of capital. In that money expresses value, it is also an expression of capital. More so, money is an appearance of value insofar as it is the universal equivalent which expresses concrete human labor. This consideration of *both* the money-form and the commodity-form as expressions of capital is no mistake. As Casarino reminds us, expression captures an object “in its capacity to be other than itself, in its potential to be different from what it is.”⁴⁹ What an understanding of the appearances of value as expressions of capital allows is for the proclivity of the commodity to be other than itself, and for appearances *generally* to be other than simply the commodity. The commodity-form, the general-form, the money-form, etc. all qualify as appearances of value, and therefore as expressions of capital, for the relation in which value appears “changes constantly with time and place”.⁵⁰ While these changes may seem “accidental and purely relative,” or written off as arbitrary and imaginary, this is simply a property of exchange-value as an expression of capital: to be fundamentally changeable.⁵¹ Value appears as is most generative for the production of surplus value, and it does so *necessarily*, as structured by the capitalist mode of production.

V. Commodity Fetishism Revisited

With this expressive view of the commodity in mind, I return to the section on commodity fetishism to demonstrate how my reading of

49 Cesare Casarino, “The Expression of Time (Spinoza, Deleuze, Cinema),” 9.

50 Marx, *Capital*, 126.

51 Ibid.

appearance as expression brings into view a more adequate understanding of the movement of capital.⁵² While the expressive appearance of the commodity-form accounts for its necessary relationship to capital, it does not explain the persistent understanding of the commodity as a representation of value. The project of this essay has not been to altogether expunge the concept of representation from Marx's critique of political economy, but to reconfigure its position. Consequently, in what follows I will demonstrate how, in accordance with Spinoza's theorization of the kinds of knowledge, both impressions of the commodity-form—as necessary expression, and as representation—can persist in the human mind.

Spinoza presents us with three kinds of knowledge in the *Ethics*: imagination, reason, and intuition.⁵³ For the purposes of this essay, we will only concern ourselves with the first two: imagination, “knowledge from inconstant experience [and] signs,” and reason, knowledge from “common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things.”⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ And while it appears that Spinoza hierarchizes these ways of knowing—imagination as the “sole cause of falsity” against reason as “necessarily true”—he understands these kinds of knowledge as acting simultaneously in the human mind, that is, they accompany one another as the mind makes sense of the world.⁵⁶ Genevieve Lloyd emphasizes that despite Spinoza's “subordination of the imagination to the critical powers of reason... the imagination [is] a powerful *ally* of reason.”⁵⁷ This is self-

52 Adequate is meant here in the rigorous Spinozist sense; of knowledge of proper causes and effects.

53 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), II P40, Schol. 2.

54 Spinoza, *Ethics*, II P40 Schol. 2.

55 Spinoza's exposition of the kinds of knowledge is by no means complete—certain contradictions in his writings, such as those indicated by Alexandre Matheron in “Idea, Idea of the Idea and Certainty in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* and the *Ethics*,” in *Politics, Ontology, and Knowledge in Spinoza* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) must be addressed in future work that seeks to rigorously reconcile Spinoza and Althusser through and in service of an interpretation of Marx.

56 *Ibid.*, II P41.

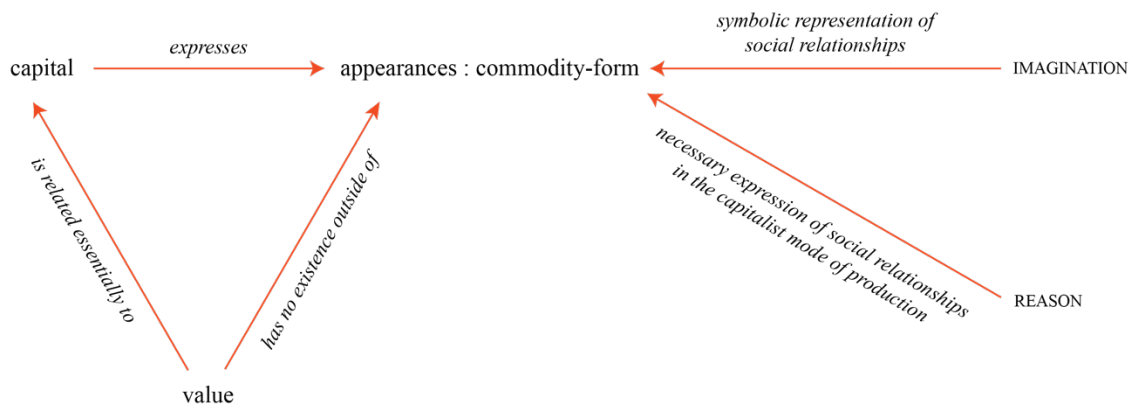
57 Genevieve Lloyd, *Routledge Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 60, emphasis mine.

evident as far as the matter of persuasion is concerned, for one is more likely to be convinced by a reasoned argument if it is accompanied by some emotive or affective appeal to the imagination. It is with this perspective—conditioned by both imagination and reason—that the human mind apprehends the commodity and is taken in by its mystery.⁵⁸ When engaged in the process of exchange, it is only natural for human beings to perceive this process as a social one, as one that establishes a relationship from man to man. From the standpoint of the imagination, which arises from the senses and deals in affective exchanges, the commodity is a representation of the act of exchange and nothing more: they do not see this exchange as constitutive of a certain economic reality. Reason, on the other hand, which derives from adequate ideas and the various properties of things as dictated by their essential nature, can see the commodity for what it is: a necessary appearance of capital in which its essence as value is expressed, shaping the conditions of possibility of social reality based on economic determinations. Furthermore, reason perceives that the inadequate conception of the commodity as representation is *also central to the movement of capital*, for without its representational illusion—that relationships between things are relationships between human beings—the commodity-form will not compel humans into the process of exchange that produces surplus value. Consequently, it becomes clear that “the permeation of everything with

58 This is reinforced by Kordela’s understanding that the “Spinozian-Marxian parallelism between extension and thought is not to be understood as an “[e]xpression” that, as Macherey puts it following Deleuze, “is the opposite of a representation” (*In A Materialist Way*, 123). To be sure, the homology of extension and thought indeed means that for “Spinoza knowledge is not ‘representation’ of the thing to the mind through the mediation of a mental image itself capable of being relayed through a system of signs; rather, knowledge is expression, that is, production and constitution of the thing itself in the mind” (*In A Materialist Way*, 123). However, this does not mean that “expression... does not require the mediation of signs in order to take place” (*In A Materialist Way*, 123). Rather, it means that this dynamic production and constitution of the thing is inseparable from a dynamic production and constitution of the sign.... It is for this reason that Spinozian monism and Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism entail a unified epistemology.” (*Epistemology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan*, 18).

value is not [merely] a subjective fallacy but part of the objective imaginary constituted by and in commodity fetishism” that is *necessary* for the continued valorization of capital.⁵⁹

Lloyd reminds us that this thesis has already been developed at length by Antonio Negri in *The Savage Anomaly*, in which he contends that while the imagination’s fictions “might not reveal the ultimate nature of our thought or of anything else... reflection *on* them can show us how the real social world of ordinary experience is constructed.”^{60 61} In this case, as visually demonstrated below, it becomes apparent how one might perceive the commodity-form representationally, from the vantage point of the imagination, and how it is possible to perceive the very same commodity-form from the perspective of reason as the necessary expression of value that shapes social reality.



This achieves a more adequate understanding of the commodity-form as it figures in the movement of capital, and particularly how the movement of capital might be considered from outside of the realm of human

59 Kordela, *Epistemology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan*, 24.

60 Genevieve Lloyd, *Routledge Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics*, 62, emphasis mine.

61 Kordela also reminds us that capitalist domination can be explicated through commodity fetishism without resorting to a transcendentalist understanding of some agent of domination standing *above* society. Rather, “in the world of the fetish, it is the earthy material thing that assumes a supernatural and, hence, “irresistible power over individuals.” Fetishism folds transcendence fully within the plane of immanence” (*Epistemology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan*, 45).

experience. The imagination becomes a vehicle through which to begin objective inquiry of political economy by way of reason, as well as providing the social object of analysis required in order for reason to trace its necessary causes.⁶²

VI. Expression as Intervention

Given that Althusser does not leave us with a substantial reading of commodity fetishism through which to develop a theory of value and value-form, I want to use the insights developed in this essay in order to supplement theorizations made by Étienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière in *Reading Capital*.⁶³ Take for example Balibar's reflection on the necessity of appearances:

Fetishism is not a subjective phenomenon or a false perception of reality, as an optical illusion or a superstitious belief would be. It constitutes, rather, the way in which reality (a certain form or social structure) *cannot but appear*. And that active 'appearing' (both *Schein* and *Erscheinung*, i.e. both illusion and phenomenon) constitutes a mediation or necessary function without which, in given historical conditions, the life of society would be quite simply

⁶² "It is because the appearance [illusion] is constituted *in* objectivity that "fetishism is not [purely] a subjective phenomenon or a false perception of reality, as an optical illusion or a superstitious belief would be. . . . we can demystify commodity fetishism only by *also* taking it seriously, as an objective fact" (Kordela, *Epistemology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan*, 26, emphasis mine).

⁶³ Althusser is dismissive of commodity fetishism, calling it "a last trace of Hegelian influence [in Marx], this time a flagrant and extremely harmful one (since all the theoreticians of 'reification' and 'alienation' have found in it the 'foundation' for their idealist interpretations of Marx's thought)" ("Preface to *Capital* Volume 1," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 95). In reframing commodity fetishism through Deleuze's concept of expression, we course-correct commodity fetishism as deriving from Spinoza. Étienne Balibar has also been known to express this standpoint—while he acknowledges that Marx's concept of value "remains largely implicit," he thinks it "out of the question to try to deduce this entirely from the "simplicity" of the "commodity-form" ("Marx's "Two Discoveries," *Actuel Marx* 50 (2), 2011, IV).

impossible. To suppress the appearance would be to abolish social relations.⁶⁴

In this passage, Balibar rejects a representational understanding of appearance in the disclaimer that commodity fetishism is neither a “subjective phenomenon” nor a “false perception of reality”—for the world to appear in terms of objects of value and objectified values is not merely representational, but actual. Commodity fetishism constitutes the way in which reality “cannot but appear” in so far as it entails the necessary expression of a world within the capitalist mode of production. Relationships between men within this mode are not simply represented by the relationships of exchange of commodities, they are necessarily expressed actually in this way and *not in any other*. That is, commodity fetishism is not only how we *seem* to interact, it *is*—with all the ontological thrust that that verb offers—how we interact. Despite his condemnation of fetishism as “totally idealist,” making impossible “the scientific explanation of the special ideological effects implied by commodity circulation,” and “prevent[ing] a materialist theory of ideology,” Balibar’s analysis of commodity fetishism pierces through the notion that fetishism is a “subjective phenomenon” or a “false perception of reality” and enables precisely a materialist theory of ideology.⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ Balibar recognizes that “the ‘representation’ of the economic is essential to the economic itself”—that appearances produced *by* the economic base *of* the economic base do not only express the essence of the capitalist mode of production, but also *obscure it*.⁶⁷ As such, Balibar’s contention that to “suppress the appearance would be to abolish social relations” holds: social relations as we experience them are nothing other than expressions of capital, as

64 Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (New York: Verso, 2009), 60-61, emphasis mine.

65 Étienne Balibar, “Self Criticism: An Answer to Questions from ‘Theoretical Practice,’” *Theoretical Practice* 7:8, 2002, 57-9.

66 Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 60.

67 Balibar, “Self Criticism: An Answer to Questions from ‘Theoretical Practice,’” 57.

structured by the process of valorization.⁶⁸ The appearance of the world in terms of value—the expression of the world *as* value—is a constituting condition and necessary function of the capitalist mode.⁶⁹

Furthermore, we may use appearance *qua* expression to decipher what Macherey identifies as “two incompatible ways of empirically presenting the commodity” in relation to value.^{70 71} These ways consist in that the commodity cannot appear *as* value—“on the contrary, it is value that appears in the form of the exchange of commodities”—nor can it appear as *possessing* value—“an intrinsic exchange-value, immanent to the commodity, seems to be a *contradiction in adjecto*.”⁷² This has made it impossible to speak of “the *value of the commodity*; paradoxically, these words cannot be uttered except in the context of an aberrant formulation.”⁷³ What appearance *qua* expression offers us in this case is a “new *form* of analysis” that maps the relationship between value, commodity, and capital without reducing the commodity to a static, unchanging

68 Ibid., 61.

69 In an essay titled “The Vacillation of Ideology in Marxism” (In *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, New York: Routledge, 1994), nearly 30 years after his original contribution to *Reading Capital*, Balibar admits that analyses of commodity and money fetishism as “classic analyses of ideology... ought to be part of the field of a theory of ideology... either to explain [its] specific effects or to have an account of its genesis” (89). As such, the analysis conducted in this essay of commodity fetishism through Spinoza’s kinds of knowledge is appropriate per Balibar’s own belated admission. He later describes commodity fetishism as “a high point of Marx’s philosophical work... one of the great theoretical constructions of modern philosophy” (Étienne Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx* (New York: Verso, 2017), 56).

70 Macherey, “On the Process of Exposition of *Capital* (The Work of Concepts),” 150.

71 I juxtapose the conceptualization of appearance as mediated by Deleuze’s notion of expression alongside Macherey’s reflections on the commodity-form with some trepidation as I acknowledge the criticisms that Macherey himself makes of Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza in “The Encounter with Spinoza” (In *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991). However, given that Macherey concludes his criticisms in the aforementioned essay with an acknowledgement that *Expressionism in Philosophy* moves beyond a “risk-free identical reproduction” (148) of Spinoza’s *Ethics*—attempting instead to “put the text to work,” (148)—I encourage readers to consider how much of Macherey’s elaboration of Althusser’s theoretical project can already be found in Deleuze’s theorization of Spinoza without needing to speculate what Althusser’s account of value-form theory might have entailed.

72 Macherey, “On the Process of Exposition of *Capital* (The Work of Concepts), 149-50.

73 Ibid., 150.

presentation of value, or conferring upon it the objective quality of value.⁷⁴ To think of the commodity as the *expression* of capital is to center Macherey's observation that value appears during the exchange of commodities in the movement M-C-M', thus providing a more accurate account of *how* and *when* value appears in relation to the commodity-form. The expressive triad shows that value cannot appear without its expression in the commodity-form, that is, "exchange-value only presents itself in... the exchange-relation."⁷⁵ As Macherey indicates in his account of Deleuze's Spinozism, "the order of expression does not correspond to a system of things... [but] is effected in action.... Expression in action is exactly the opposite of a representation"—expression articulates the structuring relations of processes rather than finds fixed meaning in individual things.⁷⁶ Again, this is not to say that the commodity does not appear in representational terms to the human mind. The specter of representation haunts the appearances of capital, and it *must* in order to drive ideological understandings of the mode of production. Yet, expression demonstrates how the commodity can be "a form for two contents" insofar as it evokes a representational, contingent understanding in the imagination while also appearing to reason as the essential expression of capital.^{77 78}

Rancière is the most explicit of Althusser's students in defending commodity fetishism, chastising those who would "interpret *Capital* on the basis of the anthropology of the young Marx... for [whom] fetishism

74 Ibid.

75 Macherey, "On the Process of Exposition of *Capital* (The Work of Concepts)," 195.

76 Pierre Macherey, "Deleuze in Spinoza," *In A Materialist Way: Selected Essays* (New York: Verso, 1998), 123.

77 Ibid., 149.

78 Matheron indicates that this is not a formal contradiction in the Spinozist sense, either, since "two things can be one under a certain relation, all the while remaining distinct under a different relation" ("Idea, Idea of the Idea and Certainty in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* and the *Ethics*," 4). That is to say, the commodity-form can evoke knowledge produced by both the imagination and reason while also appearing, in certain circumstances, as evocative of one or other faculty of knowledge.

is only a new name for alienation.”⁷⁹ He reformulates alienation as understood within the frame of *Capital*, noting that “the becoming alien in question here... designates what becomes of the relations of capital in the most mediated form of the process,” that is, in the midst of mediating appearances.⁸⁰ Taking the appearance of the commodity as its simple objective value masks that what passes into the thing during the process of valorization is not an “essence of subjectivity,” not the transcendental essence of the worker, but a “relation,” a social activity between workers.⁸¹ Consequently, Rancière perceives that the forms of appearance presented by commodity fetishism are not forms “deformed by speculation,” but are, at least on the level of the imagination, “the very forms in which the capitalist process exists for the agents of production” and must be explicated in order to develop a science of value.⁸² That Spinoza’s kinds of knowledge give us a framework by which to separate such ideological perception on the level of the imagination from scientific exposition on the level of reason only hastens the rapprochement between ideology and fetishism, which appear to produce effects in the same movement. Rancière’s intervention also foregrounds the extent to which the problem of commodity fetishism is a *formal* problem, and specifically a problem of the value-form. An expressive analysis of commodity fetishism demonstrates what Panagiotis Sotiris describes as a:

form of appearing [that] is at the same time a form of concealing not in the sense of an alienated subjectivity that loses sight of the fact that wealth in the form of commodities is the product of its own exploited labor, but in the sense of an objective process where the very result of the causal

79 Jacques Rancière, “The Concept of Critique and the Critique of Political Economy: From the *1844 Manuscripts* to *Capital*,” *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (New York: Verso, 2015), 150.

80 *Ibid.*, 156.

81 *Ibid.*, 159.

82 *Ibid.*, 166.

mechanisms is at the same time the condition of their invisibility.⁸³

In order to decipher the fetishistic structure that “emerges at the surface of the process of production,” Rancière probes how commodity fetishism refers to a “socially necessary form of misrecognition” required for the expanded reproduction of capitalist social relations.⁸⁴ Heeding Sotiris’ caution that we must not frame the problem of fetishistic appearances as one of surface forms and latent, ‘inner’ structure—which would lead us once again into conceptualizing a relationship of interiority and exteriority between the commodity and value—expression allows us to make sense of this socially necessary misrecognition of the commodity on the level of the imaginary *without* lapsing into representational theorizations.⁸⁵

VII. Expression as Critique

Althusser’s disdain for what he perceived as a remnant of Hegelian idealism in Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism prevented him from providing an adequate value-form theory. Yet it seems likely that resolving the issue of appearance in Marx lays the groundwork for precisely such a theory. That Althusser does not provide a close formal account of ideology as it is produced formally by appearances (such as that of the commodity-form in producing commodity-fetishism) is perhaps a consequence of his difficulty in separating *value* from *value-form*, a confusion that Marx contends is highly consequential.⁸⁶ Althusser admits

83 Panagiotis Sotiris, “Althusserianism and Value-form Theory: Rancière, Althusser and the Question of Fetishism,” *Crisis & Critique* 2:2, 2015, 170.

84 *Ibid.*, 179.

85 *Ibid.*, 178.

86 Karl Marx, *Capital*, 184-5.

to this difficulty in a letter addressed to his wife of his attempt to understand the famously complex opening chapters of *Capital*:

If you see Étienne, tell him that I will ask him questions about the following concepts: 1 / what is value-form? 2 / what is the difference between value and exchange value, which Marx says is not value, but its form of manifestation (*Erscheinungsform*)? 3 / Isn't there, despite everything, a relationship between value-form and exchange value, Marx playing on the word 'form'?^{87 88}

As such, an immanent theorization of value *qua* appearance provides the relationship between value and value-form while holding the materialist line. John Milios identifies the specter of this structuring relation in his Althusserian gloss on Marx's value-form theory, claiming that the two “*can* be brought together in a harmonious merger that facilitates understanding of the tenets of the Marxian critique of political economy.”⁸⁹ Milios observes that

Marx's notion of value... involves a complex conjoining of the specifically capitalist features of the labor process with the corresponding forms of appearance to the product of labor, making it possible in this way for the capital relation

⁸⁷ Louis Althusser, *Lettres À Hélène: 1947–1980* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2011), 507, translation mine.

⁸⁸ Original: “Si tu vois Étienne, annonce-lui que je lui poserai des questions sur les concepts suivants: 1/ qu'est-ce que la *forme-valeur*? 2/ quelle différence y a-t-il entre la *valeur* et la *valeur d'échange*, de laquelle Marx dit qu'elle n'est pas la valeur, mais sa forme de manifestation (*Erscheinungsform*)? 3/ Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas, malgré tout, un rapport entre la *forme-valeur*, et la valeur d'échange, Marx jouant sur le mot *forme*?”

⁸⁹ John Milios, “Rethinking Marx's Value-Form Analysis from an Althusserian Perspective,” *Rethinking Marxism* 21:2, 2009, 261, emphasis mine.

to be deciphered. Value becomes an expression of the capital relation.⁹⁰

Consequently, through Milios it becomes apparent that the non-idealist explication of the aforementioned “complex conjoining” is at the heart of Althusser’s failure to produce a value-form theory, despite his incisive analysis of ideological representations, “not as forms of false or mystified consciousness but as *socially necessary forms* of social recognition that are reproduced in practices.”⁹¹

I also venture that Althusser’s transhistorical concept of ideology prevents him from moving beyond an essentialist understanding of value. As Milios has argued, “since value and surplus value are not essences but historically specific social relations expressed and ‘measured’ only through their forms of appearance,” in order to reconcile commodity fetishism with ideology we need to appropriately historicize ideological forms of appearance as being *specific* to the capitalist mode of production.⁹² Consequently, I take issue with Althusser’s theorization of ideology as a quality of world societies generally, which divorces ideology from its formal relationship of necessity to the capitalist mode of production. Take his following reflection on ideology in *For Marx*, in which he argues that ideology is a function of any and all societies:

An ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society.... in *every* society we can posit, in forms which are sometimes very paradoxical, the existence of an economic activity as the base, a political organization and ‘ideological’ forms

90 Ibid., 264.

91 Ibid., 263, emphasis mine.

92 Ibid., 267.

(religion, ethics, philosophy, etc.). So ideology is as such an organic part of *every* social totality.⁹³

While I do not disagree with Althusser's general description of ideology—and particularly that it appears “in forms... very paradoxical”—I disagree with his specific explication of ideology as an “organic part of every social totality.” This disagreement is twofold. On the one hand, I dispute Althusser's characterization of ideology as “organic”—in this essay, I have demonstrated how the form and function of appearance as expressions of capital necessarily follow from the essence of the capitalist mode of production, and therefore emerge from specific socioeconomic circumstances. Ideology does not, by my contention, inhere in the nature of societies writ large: or, at least, we have no concrete evidence to confirm this beyond the analysis of the forms of appearance in the capitalist mode of production, which prove to be distinctly inorganic and counter to “common sense” understandings of the world (a “common sense” that these appearances themselves produce). Ideology, which for Marx is a product of the capitalist mode of production's specific processes of socialization—produced by “historically specific *social relations*: namely, as the specific form assumed by economic relations, exploitation, and the products of labor in *societies based on commodity production* (i.e., *capitalism*)”⁹⁴—is made by Althusser into a product of *all* societies. This is in contradiction with how I have endeavored to demonstrate that the appearance of value is a specific expression of the essence of capital, and not mere mystification by representation that can be expected generally in all societies and in any given mode of production. It is also in contradiction with Marx's project in *Capital*, which is to historicize a mode of production

93 Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Verso, 2006), 231-2, emphasis mine.

94 John Milios, “Rethinking Marx's Value-Form Analysis from an Althusserian Perspective,” 260.

with the appearance of ‘givenness’ and expose that it is, in fact, a product of specific sociohistorical conditions.⁹⁵

Leaving aside for a minute Althusser’s transhistorical postulation of ideology—to which I am opposed—it is notable the extent to which Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza allows us to bridge the gap between Althusser’s ideology and an immanent theory of commodity fetishism as based on expression. Drawing parallels between ideology and Spinoza’s three kinds of knowledge, Althusser himself notes that Spinoza’s ontology of relation reframes ideology, or the imaginary, as based on “the relation of men to the world “expressed” by the state of their bodies.... [not] as a “piece of knowledge,” but as the material world of men *as they live it*, that of their concrete and historical existence.”⁹⁶ Hasana Sharp indicates that Althusser uses Spinoza’s “materialism of the imaginary”⁹⁷ to show precisely that ideology must be “explained by relations of force, the practical discipline and arrangement of bodies, and the unconscious, affective structure that mediated the appearance, or imagination, of our lived world.”⁹⁸ In short, what both Althusser and Sharp entail in their materialist understanding of ideology is the persuasive appeal to the imagination of a system of appearances that obscures the social relations of production. Ideology and fetishism are neither *incompatible* nor *exchangeable* for one another⁹⁹—they are mutually constitutive of a phenomenon by which human beings necessarily misrecognize their function in the capitalist mode of production so as to continue to perform the *real* function of exchange.

95 “Marx’s Critique of Political Economy does not merely affirm that “there is exploitation”.... It also explains *why* exploitation in capitalism appears in *these specific forms*. It further reveals the necessity for elimination of the historic forms through which capitalist rule finds expression” (Ibid., 272, emphasis mine).

96 Louis Althusser, “On Spinoza,” *Essays in Self-Criticism* (New York: New Left Books, 1976), 136.

97 Ibid.

98 Hasana Sharp, “The Force of Ideas in Spinoza,” *Political Theory* 35:6, 2007, 735.

99 “[Fetishism] does not represent a mere terminological variant, but a genuine theoretical alternative” (Balibar, *Philosophy of Marx*, 42).

However, Althusser's Spinozism, much like Deleuze's, does not amount to a simple repetition of concepts.^{100 101 102} As Gil Morejón has observed, Althusser invokes Spinoza with a difference, "elaborating strategic conceptual variations that both illuminate the contours of Spinoza's systematic philosophy and respond effectively to the discursive context of their rearticulation."^{103 104} The most significant point of relation between these philosophers is the notion of the absent cause, which is variously understood as being "immanent" or "present" in its effects. This absent cause is described by Althusser in his notion of "structural causality," in which, as Robert Paul Resch explains:

Relations between elements of the whole are not exterior to the whole, as is the case with transitive causality, nor are they expressions of its immanent principle, as with expressive causality. Instead, the whole is nothing less than the

100 Despite certain oppositions between Deleuze's Spinozism and Althusser's Spinozism, Eva Mancuso in her essay "Indication as Concept: Althusser, Spinoza, and the Logic of the *Groupes Althusseriens* (1965-68)" (*Viewpoint Magazine*, July 18, 2016, <https://viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/indication-as-concept-althusser-spinoza-and-the-logic-of-the-groupes-althusseriens-1965-1968/>) suggests that the shared analysis of certain concepts enable mutual dialogue between the two, "if not a *rapprochement*."

101 Warren Montag argues that "something in Spinoza permitted Althusser, Balibar, and Macherey to read what was otherwise illegible in Marx" ("Spinoza: Politics in a World without Transcendence," *Rethinking Marxism* 2:3 (Fall), 1989, 89).

102 In an earlier essay titled "Nothing Is Possible: The Strange Spinozism of Gilles Deleuze" in *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), Knox Peden argues that Althusser's turn towards Spinozist rationalism grows out of his "intransigent refusal to compromise with the methods and insights of phenomenology," which moved him towards the development of a philosophy "designed to distinguish science from ideology" (219). In turn, this ensured that the "remit of Althusser's philosophy was primarily *discursive*" (219, emphasis mine). As such, I suggest that thinking Marx with Spinoza *as filtered through* Deleuze—which implies a certain theoretical transformation—may help fill the gaps left by Althusser's recusal from the ontological problematic that make it difficult for him to meaningfully theorize commodity fetishism.

103 Gil Morejón, "Overdetermination, Complication, Beatitude: Althusser's Physics of Social Modes," *Décálogos* 2:2 (September), 2018, 1.

104 Morejón indicates that one such transposition is Althusser's science-ideology distinction, which reimagines the distinction between adequate and inadequate knowledge in Spinoza. ("Overdetermination, Complication, Beatitude," 1).

reciprocal effectivities of its elements, at the same time as these elements are determined by the whole, that is, by their interrelationship with all the other elements within the whole.... *the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects.*¹⁰⁵

106

Consequently, in envisioning a theory of commodity fetishism using Deleuze's notion of expression, I have endeavored to work within this problematic of the relation of the whole, "which must exist outside of it not prior to its parts, [mobilizing] a notion of structure not as a kind of whole or totality but rather as a cause that exists only in its effects."¹⁰⁷ Like Sotiris, I use the absent cause in order to explain why "value take[s] this form, why it take[s] this form in exchange, although it is not constituted as such in exchange," and *also* to demonstrate the compatibility of Althusser's thought with such a reformulation of commodity fetishism.¹⁰⁸ And given Jason Read's assertion that

Neither the economy nor ideology can be the site of transformation in itself. This connection between the order of bodies and ideas does not mean that everyone is forever locked in the same action and thoughts. Rather it suggests that every transformation must be transformation of both

105 Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1992, 50.

106 In this quotation, "expressive causality" is to be understood in the Leibnizian sense.

107 Warren Montag, "Between Spinozists: The Function of Structure in Althusser, Macherey, and Deleuze," *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 86.

108 Sotiris, "Althusserianism and Value-form Theory: Rancière, Althusser and the Question of Fetishism," 170.

thoughts, a reorganizing of ways of thinking, of imagination, and actions, of practices and relations,¹⁰⁹

it is all the more urgent for us to reconcile ideology with fetishism—the order and connection of ideas and the order and connection of bodies—as a crucial step towards the transformation of capitalist social relations *in toto*.

VIII. Conclusion

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this essay is how we might approach the concept of appearance in Marx through Deleuze's concept of expression. Specifically, I have argued that a reading of appearances as the expression of capital dispels commonly-held misgivings that these appearances are purely representational. In demonstrating how appearances are the expression of value as the essence of capital, I have established a form of relation between value and its appearances that encapsulates the changeability and immanent *puissance* of value—its tendency to change through the process of valorization. Furthermore, in articulating the commodity-form with regard to the kinds of knowledge that the human mind is capable of harnessing, I have accounted for the dualistic presentation of the commodity-form as a contingent and arbitrary representation of human labor, as well as a necessary and immanent expression of value. This dualism forms the basis of what might be called an immanent theory of ideology, which requires further exposition and development in subsequent research. The centering of Marx's commodity fetishism must be central in this work.

I have also placed my superimposition of appearance and expression into conversation with key figures in the Althusserian tradition,

109 Jason Read, "The Order and Connection of Ideology Is the Same as the Order and Connection of Exploitation: Or, Towards a Bestiary of the Capitalist Imagination," *Philosophy Today* 59:2 (Spring), 2015, 187.

and have demonstrated how my argument may be used to produce a Spinozist Marxist value-form theory that can be reconciled with theories of ideology. In positioning appearance as a necessary expression of capital's essence *qua* value, I have enabled the coextension of ideology and fetishism in the maintenance of a necessary set of real relations of exchange *and* of their ideological obfuscation. Drawing attention to the isomorphism between Althusser's structural causality and Spinoza's concatenation as describing the immanent effects of an absent cause, my argument offers a redemptive critique of Althusser's theory of ideology that harnesses the thrust of Spinoza's ontology of being. As Sharp astutely indicates, "what is at stake in the reappropriation of [appearances] that are given to us in perception is not primarily a question of truth, but is most importantly a question of power," for it is only in adequately understanding of the capitalist mode of production can we begin to envision our freedom from it.¹¹⁰ It is my hope that this essay has provided pathways for the production of a rigorous reconciliation of ideology and commodity fetishism to thus further Marx's theoretical project—the development of an adequate idea of the capitalist mode of production.

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¹¹⁰ Sharp, "The Force of Ideas in Spinoza," 749.

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