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Marx's Coat

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1. FETISHIZING COMMODITIES, FETISHIZING THINGS

Marx defines capitalism as the *universalizing* of the production of commodities. He writes in the Preface to the first edition of *Capital* that "the commodity-form of the product of labour, or the value-form of the commodity" is "the economic cell-form" (Marx 1976 [1867]: 90).¹ The "economic cell-form" that occupies the first chapter of *Capital* takes the form of a *coat*. The coat makes its appearance not as the object that is made and worn but as the commodity that is exchanged. And what defines the coat as a commodity, for Marx, is that you cannot wear it and it cannot keep you warm. But while the commodity is a cold abstraction, it feeds, vampire-like, on human labour. The contradictory moods of Marx's *Capital* are an attempt to capture the contradictoriness of capitalism itself: the most abstract society that has ever existed; a society that consumes ever more concrete human bodies. The abstraction of this society is represented by the commodity-form itself. For the commodity becomes a commodity not as a thing but as an exchange value. It achieves its purest form, in fact, when most emptied out of particularity and thingliness. As a *commodity*, the coat achieves its destiny as an *equivalence*: as 20 yards of linen, 10 lb. ✓

of tea, 40 lb. of coffee, 1 quarter of wheat, 2 ounces of gold, half a ton of iron (Marx 1976 [1867]: 157). To fetishize the commodity is to fetishize abstract exchange-value—to worship, that is, at the altar of the *Financial Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* which trace the number of paper cups that will buy you an academic book, the number of academic books that will buy you a Cuisinart, the number of Cuisinarts that will buy you a snowmobile. In *Capital*, Marx's coat appears only immediately to disappear again, because the nature of capitalism is to produce a coat not as a material particularity but as a "supra-sensible" value (Marx 1976 [1867]: 165). The work of Marx's *Capital* is to trace that value back through all its detours to the human labor whose appropriation produces capital (see Scarry 1985). This leads Marx theoretically to the labor theory of value and to an analysis of surplus-value. It leads him politically to the factories, the working conditions, the living spaces, the food, and the clothing of those who produce a wealth that is expropriated from them.

The coat—the commodity with which Marx begins *Capital*—has only the most tenuous relation to the coat that Marx himself wore on his way to the British Museum to research *Capital*. The coat that Marx wore went in and out of the pawnshop. It had very specific uses: to keep Marx warm in winter; to situate him as a suitable citizen to be admitted to the Reading Room. But the coat, any coat, as an exchange-value is emptied out of any useful function. Its physical existence is, as Marx puts it, "phantom-like":

If we make abstraction from [the commodity's] use-value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value. . . . All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished (Marx 1976 [1867]: 128).

Although the commodity takes the shape of a physical thing, the "commodity-form" has "absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this" (Marx 1976 [1867]: 165). To fetishize commodities is, in one of Marx's least-understood jokes, to reverse the whole history of fetishism. For it is to fetishize the invisible, the immaterial, the supra-sensible. The fetishism of the commodity inscribes immateriality as the defining feature of capitalism.

Thus, for Marx, *fetishism* is not the problem; the problem is the fetishism of *commodities*. So what does it mean that the concept of "fetishism" continues to be used primarily in a *negative* way, often with the explicit invocation of Marx's use of the term? This is the ges-

ture of exploitation that established the term in the first place. As William Pietz has brilliantly argued, the "fetish" emerges through the trading relations of the Portuguese in West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Pietz 1985, 1987). Pietz shows that the fetish as a concept was elaborated to demonize the supposedly arbitrary attachment of West Africans to material objects. The European subject was constituted in opposition to a demonized fetishism, through the disavowal of the object. It is profoundly paradoxical that widely antagonistic ideological critiques of European modernity share the assumption that that modernity is characterized by a thoroughgoing materialism. The force of that denunciation depends upon the assumption of a place before the fall into materialism, a society where people are spiritually pure, uncontaminated by the objects around them.³ But to oppose the materialism of modern life to a nonmaterialist past is not just wrong; it actually *inverts* the relation of capitalism to prior and alternative modes of production. As Marcel Mauss puts it in *The Gift*, his founding book on precapitalist exchange, objects in such exchanges can be "personified beings that talk and take part in the contract. They state their desire to be given away." Things-as-gifts are not "indifferent things"; they have "a name, a personality, a past" (Mauss 1967 [1925]: 55).⁴ The radically dematerialized opposition between the "individual" and his or her "possessions" (between subject and object) is one of the central ideological oppositions of capitalist societies. As Igor Kopytoff notes, "this conceptual polarity of individualized persons and commoditized things is recent and, culturally speaking, exceptional" (Kopytoff 1986: 64).

One aspect of this dematerializing polarity was the development of the concept of the "fetish." The *fetisso* marks, as Pietz shows, less the ancient distrust of false manufactures (as opposed to the "true" manufactured wafers and images of the Catholic Church) than a suspicion both of material embodiment itself and of "the subjection of the human body . . . to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments" (Pietz 1985: 10). The *fetisso* thus represents "a subversion of the ideal of the autonomously determined self" (Pietz 1987: 23). Moreover, the fetish (in contrast to the free-standing idol) was from the first associated with objects *worn on the body*—leather pouches, for instance, worn round the neck containing passages from the *Koran* (Pietz 1987: 37). The concept of the "fetish" was developed literally to *demonize* the power of "alien" worn objects (through the association of *feitico* with witchcraft). And it emerged as the European subject simultaneously subjugated and

enslaved other subjects and proclaimed its own freedom from material objects.

This disavowal of the object has often been read as merely a ruse. In this view, European entrepreneurs proclaimed their detachment from objects, while "fetishistically" collecting them. But this constant repetition of "fetishism" as a category of abuse repeats rather than illuminates the problem. For European entrepreneurs did not, at least after the early trading stages, fetishize objects; on the contrary, they were interested in objects only to the extent that they could be transformed into commodities and exchanged for profit on the market. As a term of economic abuse, the concept of the fetish defined those with whom the Europeans traded in Africa and in the Americas as people who worshipped "trifles" ("mere" fetishes) and "valuable" things (i.e. gold and silver) alike. This meant that they could be "duped" (i.e. what the Europeans considered valueless—beads, for instance—could be exchanged for "valuable" goods). But it also implied a new definition of what it meant to be European: that is, a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects, a subject who, having recognized the true (i.e. market) value of the object-as-commodity, fixated instead upon the transcendental values that transformed gold into ships, ships into guns, guns into tobacco, tobacco into sugar, sugar into gold, and all into an accountable profit. What was demonized in the concept of the fetish was the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects that are touched and loved and worn.

A by-product of this demonization was the impossible project of the transcendental subject, a subject constituted by no place, no object—by nothing worn. "The Word *Fetish*," John Atkins wrote in 1737, "is used in a double signification among the *Negroes*: It is applied to dress and ornament, and to something revered as a Deity" (quoted in Pietz 1988: 110). The European subject, on the other hand, "knew the value of things"—that is, disavowed any but a financial investment in objects. Clothes could be "fashion"—detachable and discardable goods—but they were less and less likely to be fashionings, the materializations of memory, objects that worked upon and transformed the body of the wearer. In attributing the notion of the fetish to the commodity, Marx ridiculed a society that thought it had surpassed the "mere" worship of objects supposedly characteristic of "primitive religions." For Marx, the fetishism of the commodity was a regression from the materialism (however distorted) that fetishized the object. The problem for Marx was thus not with fetishism as such but rather with a specific *form* of fetishism that

took as its object not the animized object of human labor and love but the evacuated nonobject that was the site of exchange. In the place of a coat, there was a transcendental value that erased both the making and the wearing of the coat. *Capital* was Marx's attempt to give back the coat to its owner.

2. MARX'S COAT

1852 was another catastrophic year for the Marx household.⁵ In the early months of the year, Marx was writing *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, itself an attempt to come to terms with the failures of the 1848 revolutions and the triumph of reaction. From January 2nd to the 24th, he was ill in bed, writing with the greatest difficulty. But he had to write, since that, along with gifts from Engels and what they could pawn, was the source of the household's income, a household consisting of four children and three adults. In fact, not only did Marx have to write; he had to write *journalism*. In June 1850, Marx had obtained a ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum, and he had begun to do the research that would be the basis for *Capital*. But to finance that research, he needed to write for money.⁶ Moreover, during his illness, he couldn't get to the Museum anyway. But when he recovered, he wanted to put in at least some time at the library. He couldn't do it. So desperate had the financial situation become that not only had his credit with the butcher and the greengrocer dried up, but he had been forced to pawn his overcoat.⁷ On the 27th February, he wrote to Engels: "A week ago I reached the pleasant point where I was unable to go out for want of the coats I have in pawn" (Marx 1983a [1852–55]: 50). Without his overcoat, he could not go to the British Museum (see Draper 1985: 61). I do not think there is a simple answer to why he could not go. No doubt, it was not advisable for a sick man to face an English winter without an overcoat. But social and ideological factors were probably equally significant. The Reading Room did not accept just *anyone* from off the streets, and a man without an overcoat, even if he had a ticket, *was* just anyone. Without his overcoat, Marx was, in an expression whose force it is hard to recapture, "not fit to be seen."

Marx's overcoat was to go in and out of the pawnshop throughout the 1850s and early 1860s. And his overcoat directly determined what work he could or could not do. If his overcoat was at the pawnshop during the winter, he could not go to the British Museum. If he could not go to the British Museum, he could not undertake the

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research for *Capital*. What clothes Marx wore thus shaped what he wrote. There is a level of vulgar material determination here that is hard even to contemplate. And yet vulgar material determinations were precisely what Marx contemplated, and the whole first chapter of *Capital* traces the migrations of a coat as a commodity within the capitalist marketplace. Of course, if he had pawned his coat, there was a simple sense in which Marx needed to stop his researches and get back to journalism. His researches brought in no money; his journalism brought in a little. Only through his journalism (and through the support of Engels and of relations) could he raise the money not only to eat and pay the rent but also to get his overcoat out of pawn, and only with his overcoat was he fit to return to the British Museum. But there was a further direct connection between the pawnshop and the materials of Marx's writing. Even journalism, and particularly the journalism which Marx undertook, required materials: newspapers, books, pen and ink, paper. In September of the same year, he was unable to write his articles for the *New York Daily Times* because he couldn't afford the newspapers that he needed to read for his articles. In October, Marx had to pawn "a coat dating back to my Liverpool days in order to buy writing paper" (Marx 1983a [1852-55]: 21; see Draper 1985: 64-65).

A sense of just how precarious the Marxes' economic life was during this period is captured by the report of a Prussian spy, probably from the fall of 1852:

Marx lives in one of the worst—therefore, one of the cheapest—quarters of London. He occupies two rooms. The one looking out on the street is the living room, and the bedroom is at the back. In the whole apartment there is not one clean and solid piece of furniture. Everything is broken down, tattered and torn, with a half inch of dust over everything and there is a large old-fashioned table covered with an oilcloth, and on it there lie his manuscripts, books and newspapers, as well as the children's toys, and rags and tatters of his wife's sewing basket, several cups with broken rims, knives, forks, lamps, an inkpot, tumblers, Dutch clay pipes, tobacco ash—in a word, everything topsy-turvy, and all on the same table. A seller of second-hand goods would be ashamed to give away such a remarkable collection of odds and ends (McLellan 1981: 35).

A second-hand dealer might have been ashamed but the Marxes could not afford to be. Their broken-down furniture, their pots and pans, their cutlery, their own clothes had exchange value. And they

knew just what that value was, since item after item of their belongings travelled to and from the pawnbroker.

What the family had acquired from the von Westphalens, Jenny's aristocratic family, was turned into liquid assets. In 1850, Jenny pawned the family silver. According to the recollections of Henry Hyndman, Marx's own attempts to pawn more silver had met with disaster:

On one occasion Marx himself being in great need went out to pawn some household silver. He was not particularly well dressed and his knowledge of English was not so good as it became later. The silver, unfortunately, as it turned out, bore the crest of the Duke of Argyll's family, the Campbells, with which house Mrs. Marx was directly connected. Marx arrived at the Bank of the Three Balls and produced his spoons and forks. Saturday night, foreign Jew, dress untidy, hair and beard roughly combed, handsome silver, noble crest—evidently a very suspicious transaction indeed. So thought the pawnbroker to whom Marx applied. He therefore detained Marx, on some pretext, while he sent for the police. The policeman took the same view as the pawnbroker and also took poor Marx to the police station. There again appearances were strongly against him. . . . So Marx received the unpleasant hospitality of a police cell, while his anxious family mourned his disappearance . . . (McLellan 1981: 149).

This was a story that Mrs. Marx told late in her life, and it may be that she condensed many tribulations into one vivid story. But whatever the literal truth of the account, it captures the contradictory life of the Marxes in the 1850s, defined now not by their aristocratic and middle-class connections in Germany but by their poor clothes, their foreignness, and, in Marx's case, by his being Jewish.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx analysed the power and instability of clothes. The text is actually suspended between two different accounts of the appropriation of clothes. The first account is an almost exact inversion of Marx's own situation. That is, his own project was constantly threatened by the dispersal of his clothes and the pawning of his overcoat, with the constant diminishment of his authority even to enter the British Museum. But *The Eighteenth Brumaire* begins with the attempts of others to assume the authoritative clothes of the past so as to create authority in the present. If "the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living," it is only by the reawakening of the dead that previous revolutions have legitimated themselves. Revolution has

previously appeared in borrowed "names" and borrowed "costumes": Luther put on the "mask" of St. Paul; the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 "draped" itself successively as the Roman republic and the Roman empire; Danton, Robespierre, Napoleon "performed the task of their time in Roman costume" (Marx 1963 [1852]: 16). These are, of course, metaphors. But they are metaphors that have been historically literalized. That is, the dress codes and the iconography of both the French revolution and the French empire drew upon the dress codes and iconography of the Roman republic and the Roman empire. "Unheroic as bourgeois society is," Marx writes, in its first revolutionary moments it clothes itself in the past so as to imagine itself in terms of "the great historical tragedy" (Marx 1963 [1852]: 16).

Ironically, Marx finds his own historical purpose in the grotesque image of Louis Bonaparte's reclothing of the present in the splendid robes of the past, a reclothing that discredits past and present alike. Although Marx begins his polemic against Louis Bonaparte's rise by representing it as a grotesque farce (or "second edition" [Marx 1963 (1852): 15]) of the "tragedy" of the eighteenth Brumaire, when Napoleon I came to power, Marx concludes by asserting that Louis's parody strips bare the past. The present is less a story of decline (the decline from tragedy to farce) than an unmasking of the past as itself farce. At the very conclusion of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx writes that Louis has revived "the cult of the Napoleonic mantle." "But when the imperial mantle finally falls on the shoulders of Louis Bonaparte, the bronze statue of Napoleon will crash from the top of the Vendome Column" (Marx 1963 [1852]: 135). Louis Bonaparte thus achieves by accident precisely what Marx himself tries to achieve: the dismantling of the triumphalist forms of the State.

Yet the concept of ideological or political dismantling was, as Marx's work increasingly argued, inadequate to address the economic forces which quite literally dismantled the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat while dressing the bourgeoisie in the borrowed robes of emergent capitalism—the robes that the bourgeoisie acquired through the appropriated labor of those who worked above all in the textile industries. England, where Marx now lived, was the heartland of capitalism *because* it was the heartland of the textile industries. Its wealth had been founded first on wool and then on cotton. Engels was himself sent to England to work in and then manage a Manchester cotton mill in which his family held a partnership. To the extent that the Marxes survived on Engels's generosity, they lived on the profits of the cotton industry. But they survived through the 1850s and early 60s only marginally. Engels's father insisted that he learn

the industry from the bottom up, and, particularly in the early part of this period, he did not have much money to spare. Even to earn the little he did, he had to sacrifice his own ambitions as a journalist in London and follow a trade that repelled him (see McLellan 1978: 21–29). We confront here a curious paradox in Marx's life. That is, while he undertook in a way that had never been done before an analysis of the systematic workings of capitalism, he himself depended mainly upon precapitalist or marginally capitalist practices: small inheritances; gifts; the writing of tracts that often had to be subsidized. But while he worked mainly outside the capitalist marketplace, he still lived during the period of which I write what can only be called a proletarian and at times subproletarian life.

Marx learned about the workings of capitalism mainly from political work and conversation and from his massive reading in the British Museum, but he learned about the kind of domestic life that the working classes lived first-hand. It was a life lived in crowded rooms (for the Marxes between six and eight people in two and then three rooms in the 1850s) (see Padover 1978: 23); a life in debt to bakers and grocers and butchers⁸; a life in which a purchase often had to be balanced out by the selling or pawning of some previous purchase. Like any working class household, the hopes and despairs of the Marxes could be traced by their journeys to the pawnbrokers. Let me give just a very selective account of the Marx household's dealings with the pawnbrokers. In 1850, Jenny Marx pawned silver in Frankfurt and sold furniture in Cologne (Marx 1982 [1844–51]: 38). In 1852, Marx pawned his overcoat to buy paper on which to continue to write (Draper 1985: 65). In 1853, "so many of our absolute essentials ha[ve] found their way to the pawnbroker's and the family ha[s] grown so shabby, that for the past ten days there hasn't been a sou in the house" (Marx 1983a [1852–55]: 385). In 1856, to finance the move to a new house, they needed not only all of Engels's help but also to pawn household possessions (Marx 1983b [1856–59]: 70). In 1858, at another time of drastic financial crisis, Jenny Marx pawned her shawl, and, at the end of the year, she was beset with dunning letters from her creditors and was forced "to run errands to the pawnshops in town" (Marx 1983b [1856–59]: 255, 360). In April 1862, they owed £20 for the rent and had pawned their own, their children's, and Helene Demuth's clothes (Marx 1985 [1860–64]: 380). They redeemed them later in the spring but had to put them back in pawn in June. In January of the next year, not only were they in need of food and coal, but the children's clothes were again pawned and they couldn't go to school. In 1866, the household was again in

distress, everything possible was pawned, and Marx could not afford to buy writing paper (Draper 1985: 133).

The most complete account of their accounts during this period are in a letter from Marx to Engels in July 1858 (Marx 1983b [1856–59]: 329–30). He writes that the situation is “absolutely untenable” and that he is “*completely disabled* [in English] from doing any work” because of his domestic miseries. On top of debts to the baker, the butcher, the cheesemonger, the greengrocer, and £3 10s. for chemises, dresses, shoes, and hats for the children, he paid £3 in interest to the pawnshop, and another £3 10s. for redeeming linen and other things from the pawnshop. On top of that, he was paying weekly money to the tallyman for a coat and trousers for himself. A tallyman was someone who supplied goods on credit, to be paid for by installments. They were, as a dictionary of canting terms put it in 1700, “Brokers that let out Clothes at moderate Rates to wear per Week, Month, or Year.” An earlier pamphlet more harshly asserted that “The unconscionable Tally-man . . . lets them have ten-shillings-worth of sorry commodities, . . . on security given to pay him twenty shillings by twelve-pence a week.”⁹ In other words, the poorer you were, the more expensive it was to live. Pawn-tickets had to be regularly paid, if the pledge was not to be lost. And if you couldn’t afford to buy clothes outright, you had to pay much more to buy them over an extended period.

Marx’s domestic life, then, depended upon the “petty calculations” that characterized working class life. Any pleasure or luxury had to be priced in relation to the sacrifice of another pleasure or even necessity. “Respectability,” that central nineteenth-century virtue, was something to be bought and, in times of need, pawned. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, written in 1844, Engels had described both the materiality and the fragility of that respectability. He recorded a thousand small stories, as of the woman prosecuted for her children’s thefts. She had sold her bedstead and pawned the bedding to buy food (Engels 1987 [1845]: 74). Respectability was a bed, bedding, kitchenware, but, above all, suitable clothes. Clothes, Engels wrote, were the visible markers of class:

The clothing of the working people, in the majority of cases, is in a very bad condition. The material used for it is not of the best adapted. Wool and linen have almost vanished from the wardrobe of both sexes, and cotton has taken their place. Shirts are made of bleached or coloured cotton goods; the dresses of the women are chiefly of cotton print goods, and woollen petticoats are rarely seen on the wash-

line. The men wear chiefly trousers of fustian or other heavy cotton goods, and jackets or coats of the same. Fustian has become the proverbial costume of the working men, who are called “fustian jackets,” and call themselves so in contrast to the gentlemen who wear broad cloth. When Fergus O’Connor, the Chartist leader, came to Manchester during the insurrection of 1842, he appeared, amidst the deafening applause of the working men, in a fustian suit of clothing (Engels 1987 [1845]: 102–3).

If the clothes of the poor were haunted by the spectre of dispossession (their transformation into cash at the pawnbrokers), they could also become the materialization of class resistance. Engels’ account of Fergus O’Connor’s fustian points to the construction of a symbolic discourse of class through the very materials of class oppression.

“Fustian” was a coarse cloth made of thick, twilled cotton with a short pile or nap. It was usually dyed an olive, leaden, or other dark color. By the nineteenth century, fustian had become exclusively associated with the working classes. In 1861, Digby wrote of “the fustian rascal and his lack-linen mate” and Hardy wrote in 1883 of the “hob-nailed and fustianed peasantry.”¹⁰ What is striking about Fergus O’Connor’s performance as a Chartist is that, despite his pretensions to Irish royal ancestry and his financial independence, he self-consciously adopted the dress of his followers. When he was released from prison in 1841, he was, the *Northern Star* records,

habited, as he had promised, in fustian. He wore a full suit made out of one piece which had been manufactured expressly for the occasion, and was presented by those who had not only his welfare at heart but were imbued with his principles and with his spirit—the blistered hands and fustian jackets of Manchester (quoted in Pickering 1986: 157).

On his release, O’Connor explicated the class significance of the clothes he was wearing: “I have appeared Brother Chartists and working men amongst you in fustian, the emblem of your order, in order to convince you, at a single glance, that what I was when I left you, the same I do return to you.” In fact, O’Connor’s identification with fustian preceded his release; his contributions to the *Northern Star* had been consistently addressed to the “fustian jackets” and “blistered hands.” And O’Connor’s assumption of fustian transformed a cheap material into the badge of radical class consciousness. In August 1841, a Preston Chartist wrote to O’Connor:

the greatest object of my writing to you [is] to know what colour of fustian or moleskin you would come out of prison in . . . [I]f we poor devils are ever permitted to have another new jacket, we would like the same colour (quoted in Pickering 1986: 161).

Fustian thus became a material memorial, an embodiment of a class politics that preceded a political language of class.

But the day to day experience of working people reveals that even the poorest of clothes—including fustian—were not the stable markers of social identity. The clothes constantly migrated. Working men might buy a woollen coat for Sunday, but it would be made of the cheapest wool, so-called “Devil’s dust” cloth that tore easily and was soon threadbare, or it would come from a second-hand dealer. Engels wrote that “the working man’s clothing is, in most cases, in bad condition, and there is the oft-recurring necessity for placing the best pieces in the pawnbroker’s shop” (Engels 1987 [1845]: 103). “Furniture, Sunday clothes where such exist, kitchen utensils in masses are fetched from the pawnbrokers on Saturday night only to wander back, almost without fail, before the next Wednesday . . .” (Engels 1987 [1845]: 152). Clothes, in fact, rather than kitchen utensils, were the usual pledge. In a survey of pawnbrokers in 1836, clothing accounted for more than 75 percent of the total, with metal goods (including watches, rings, and medals) a mere 7.4 percent, and Bibles accounting for 1.6 percent (Tebbutt 1983: 33).

The usual pattern of pawnshop trade, as Melanie Tebbutt has finely shown, was for wages received on Friday or Saturday to be used to get one’s best clothes out of pawn. The clothes were worn on Sunday and then pawned again on Monday (a day in which one pawnshop received three times as many pledges as on any other day) (Tebbutt 1983: 6). And the cycle was a rapid one, the majority of items being pawned and redeemed again on a weekly or monthly basis. The rate of pawning and redemption was itself an indicator of wealth and poverty. At two pawnbrokers in Liverpool in the 1860s, at the poorest 66 percent of the pledges were redeemed within the week and 82 percent within the month, while at the more upscale pawnbroker there was a slower turnover, 33 percent of the pledges being redeemed weekly and 62 percent monthly (Tebbutt 1983: 9). A carpenter who had pawned his tools for 15 shillings during a strike pawned his best clothes to redeem them when the strike ended. When he returned to work, he took his tools back to the pawnshop every Saturday to redeem his best clothes, which he repawned every Monday in exchange for his tools. For the 15 shillings he got in ex-

change for his pledges, he had to pay 8d. a week (an interest rate of about 4.5 percent weekly, 19 percent monthly, and 235 percent yearly) (Tebbutt 1983: 32–33). The extent to which many families’ best clothes inhabited the pawnshop for the majority of the year is suggested by the sudden increases in their redemption at major festivals, such as Whit Week, when people dressed up as best they could for the celebration of Spring (Tebbutt 1983: 33)

For the Marxes, the pawning of their clothes sharply delimited their social possibilities. In the winter of 1866, Jenny Marx could not go out because all her respectable clothes were pawned (Marx 1987 [1864–68]: 331). The following year, their three daughters were invited for a holiday in Bordeaux: not only did they have to calculate all the expenses of the journey but they also had to redeem their children’s clothes from the pawnshop to make them presentable (Marx 1987 [1864–68]: 397). Happiness was often measured in the buying of new clothes or the redemption of things from the pawnshop. When Wilhelm Wolff died in 1864, leaving Marx a sizeable legacy, Marx wrote: “I should very much like to buy Manchester silk for the *whole* family” (Marx 1985 [1860–64]: 527). Death, in fact, produced the most contradictory of emotions. If it was one of the family, a coffin had to be bought, funeral expenses to be met, and the Marxes frequently did not have the money to meet those expenses (see McLellan 1981: 25). But if a relative with money died, it was a cause for celebration.¹¹ Naked commercial transactions and the most intimate of family ties are framed in the same language: “uncle” or “pop” are the names for both relatives and pawnbrokers. Both “uncle” and “pop” suggest not only the familiarity of the repeatedly visited pawnbroker but also the conception of a relative as someone one hopes to get some cash out of, as from a pawnbroker. For the Marxes, uncles and “uncles” were often equivalent and alternative sources for their financial survival.

But relations with the pawnbroker were structurally antagonistic.¹² For it was at the pawnshop that the double life of things appeared in its most contradictory form. Things to be pawned might be household necessities and markers of achievement and success, but they were also often the repositories of memory. But to pawn an object is to denude it of memory. For only if an object is stripped of its particularity and history can it again become a commodity and an exchange value. From the perspective of the pawnshop, any value other than exchange-value is *sentimental* value, a value of which the object must be stripped if it is to be “freely” exchanged on the market. It was thus in the pawnshop, not in the factories that were

increasingly the motor of capitalist production, that the opposition between the particularity of a thing and the abstract exchange-value of a commodity was most visible. If you had as privileged a past as Jenny Marx, you might take to "uncle" table napkins of old Scottish descent (Marx 1985 [1860-64]: 570-71). But that family history, which was of undoubted significance to Jenny Marx, would be of no significance to the pawnbroker unless it added to the objects' exchange value. The pawnbroker did not pay for personal or family memories. To the contrary. In the language of nineteenth century clothes-makers and repairers, the wrinkles in the elbows of a jacket or a sleeve were called "memories." Those wrinkles recorded the body that had inhabited the garment. They memorized the interaction, the mutual constitution, of person and thing.¹³ But from the perspective of commercial exchange, every wrinkle or "memory" was a devaluation of the commodity.

Memories were thus inscribed for the poor within objects that were haunted by loss. For the objects were in a constant state of being-about-to-disappear. The calculation of the likely future journeys of clothes and other objects to the pawnshop was inscribed within their purchase.¹⁴ As Ellen Ross notes, "the 'bank' of ornaments" on a working class mantle was indeed a bank, since it represented the scarce resources which could nevertheless be pawned and turned into cash in times of need (Ross 1993: 46). Objects, and the memories attached to them, did not stay in place for the poor. They could rarely become heirlooms. And the objects used as pledges could be anything that still had exchange value. In the 1820s, Charles Dickens while still a boy went to the pawnshop with the family's valued books: *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, *Tom Jones*, *Humphrey Clinker* (Johnson 1952: I, 31). Worse was to come. After his father's release after being imprisoned for a debt of £40, insolvency proceedings were brought against him. "The law provided that the clothing and personal effects of the debtor and his dependents must not exceed £20 in value" (Johnson 1952: I, 37). Charles was consequently sent to an official appraiser to have his clothes valued. He was wearing a boy's white hat, a jacket, and corduroy trousers, nothing of much value, but he was painfully aware of his grandfather's silver watch ticking away in his pocket.

Dickens's painful awareness of the relations between memory, exchange-value, and the pawnshop shape his later account of "The Pawnbroker's Shop" in *Sketches by Boz*. A young woman and her mother bring in "a small gold chain and a 'Forget-me-not' ring," given "in better times" and "prized, perhaps, once, for the giver's

sake" (Dickens 1994 [1833-39]: 192). Now, the two women argue with the broker over how much the objects are worth. This account of the pawnshop, though, not only establishes a distance from Dickens's own experiences but also violently reorders it so as to associate commodity exchange with being female. For the women are depicted as on their ways to becoming commodities. This is already figured in the fact that they part with their memorials "without a struggle" (Dickens 1994 [1833-39]: 192). In fact, Dickens's account simultaneously sentimentalizes and demonizes the transaction. As he himself noted, costermongers and fishwomen showed what he elsewhere called "strange forethought," buying "great squab brooches" and "massive silver rings" as "convenient pledges" (quoted in Tebbutt 1983: 17). In contrast, memorial jewelry tended to be pawned in exceptional circumstances. In 1884, it was a sign of how bad the depression was that a single Sunderland pawnbroker received 1,500 wedding rings as pledges and 3,000 watches (Tebbutt 1983: 26). One woman recollected women crying as they looked at "the wedding rings in the window, their own wedding rings," which "they'd no way of redeeming at all" (Tebbutt 1983: 26). Nevertheless, the future possibility of pawning could enter into the buying of a memorial ring:

A young war bride who grew up in Jarrow during the 1930s and had stark memories of how her mother had pledged her own ring during the depression made her fiancé buy the most expensive one he could afford as similar insurance against the future (Tebbutt 1983: 26).¹⁵

This endemic tension between forms of memorialization and self-constitution and forms of commodity exchange is treated by Dickens in "The Pawnbroker's Shop" only in terms of female corruption. Cruikshank's accompanying illustration shows the mother and her daughter framed by, on one side, a "young female, whose attire, miserably poor but extremely gaudy, wretchedly cold but extravagantly fine, too plainly bespeaks her station" and, on the other, a woman who is "the lowest of the low; dirty, unbonneted, flaunting, and slovenly" (Dickens 1994 [1833-39]: 192). Dickens displaces onto women the relation between the particularity of the object-as-memory and the generality of the object-as-commodity, the former figured as "true love," the latter as prostitution.

Dickens and Cruikshank represent in demonized form the actual gendering of the pawnshop, where, as Ellen Ross has shown, the transactions were largely conducted by women.¹⁶ Ross writes:

That pawning was so heavily a female domain in Victorian and Edwardian London tells us something about the sorts of things commonly pawned—clothing and household goods—and also that pawning was often a stage of meal preparation (Ross 1993: 47).

The pawnings of Marx's household were no different in this respect. If Marx wrote about the workings of money, it was his wife, Jenny, and their servant, Helene Demuth, who organized the household's finances and made the trips to the pawnbroker. Wilhelm Liebknecht, a German exile who visited the Marxes almost daily in the 1850s, noted "all the work" that Helene Demuth did: "I will only remind you of the many trips to that mysterious, deeply hated and still assiduously courted, all-benevolent relative: the 'uncle' with the three globes" (McLellan 1981: 59). And Jenny Marx was also back and forth to the pawnshop throughout the 1850s. Looking back at this period, she wrote in a letter to Liebknecht that

In all these struggles, the harder because the pettier part falls to us women. While the men are invigorated by the fight in the world outside, strengthened by coming face to face with the enemy, be its number legion, we sit at home darning stockings (Padover 1978: 42).

She might have added, providing the material forms of survival from the pawnshop.

Yet Marx himself was never isolated from the crisis of the household's finances, as his endless begging letters to Engels witness. And even his stories to his children are shadowed by the migration of objects under the pressure of debt. When, in 1895, Eleanor Marx recalled her life with her father, she wrote:

of the many wonderful tales Moor told me, the most wonderful, the most delightful one, was "Hans Röckle." It went on for months; it was a whole series of stories. . . . Hans Röckle himself was a Hoffmann-like magician, who kept a toyshop, and who was always "hard up." His shop was full of the most wonderful things—of wooden men and women, giants and dwarfs, kings and queens, workmen and masters, animals and birds as numerous as Noah got into the Ark, tables and chairs, carriages, boxes of all sorts and sizes. And though he was a magician, Hans could never meet his obligations either to the devil or to the butcher, and was therefore—much against the grain—constantly obliged to sell his toys to the devil. These then went through wonderful adventures—always ending in a return to Hans Röckle's shop (McLellan 1981: 100–101).

Hans Röckle's toyshop seems to incorporate the plenitude of the world of made things. And those things, like their owner, have magical powers. But, because Röckle is constantly in debt, he is forever obliged to sell his toys to the devil. The moment of sale is the moment of alienation, of the stripping of the magic of the toys as they are transformed into exchange-values. But Marx's story refuses the transformation of the toys into commodities. Although they are sold to the devil, he never becomes their possessor, for they have a life of their own, a life which finally leads them back to their point of origin, Hans Röckle. The stories that Marx told to his young daughter surely allegorize both the moments of absolute dispossession and the trips to the pawnbroker's shop. Before Eleanor was born, her parents had watched the bailiffs enter their lodgings and take away everything, including "the best of the toys belonging to the girls"; they had watched Jenny and Laura weeping for the loss. But in the stories, as in the trips to the pawnbroker's shop when they were in cash, the moment of loss is undone: the toys come back.

It was to the systematic undoing of loss that Marx dedicated his entire life. The loss, of course, was not his own; it was the loss of the entire working class, alienated from the means of production. That alienation meant that they, the producers of the greatest multiplicity of things that the world had ever known, were forever on the outside of that material plenitude, their faces peering in through the toyshop window at the toys that they had made but that now had been possessed as "private property." The private property of the bourgeoisie was bought at the price of the dispossession of the working classes from the things of this world. In so far as they had possessions, they held them precariously. If their things were sometimes animated by their loves, their histories, their handlings, they were often animated by the workings of a marketplace that took back those things and stripped them of their loves and their histories, devalued them because they had been handled. But, for Marx, the pawnshop could not be the starting point for an analysis of the relation between object and commodity. There are, I think, two reasons for this. The first is that the pawnbroker is, from Marx's perspective, an agent in the consumption and recirculation of goods rather than in their production. The second is that, although at the pawnshop one sees the transformation of object into commodity, this particular transformation is as much a feature of precapitalist as of capitalist formations. There is nothing specifically new about exchange value or, for that matter, about pawnbrokers. And to figure the pawnbroker as the capitalist leads into all the most predictable forms of reactionary ideology: the middle man as exploiter; the Jew or Korean as

the origin of oppression.¹⁷ The pawnbroker both precedes capitalism and is marginal to it, at least in its later manifestations.

There was, as Marx knew, a form of magic in the material transformations that capitalism performed. It is a magic that Hans Christian Andersen captures in his story, "The Shirt Collar." The collar wants to get married, and proposes in the wash to a garter. But she won't tell him her name, so he proposes to the iron, who burns a hole in him, and addresses him disdainfully as "You rag." Finally, at the papermill, the collar says

it's high time I changed into white paper. And that's what happened. All the rags were turned into white paper; but the collar became this very bit of paper we have before us, on which the story has been printed (Andersen 1982 [1849]: 231).

Andersen restores to the notion of the book, which had become increasingly the "invisible" medium joining the immaterial ideas of the writer to the immaterial mind of the reader, the literal matter of the book and the participation of "literature" in the life-cycle of cloth. What Marx restores to the notion of the book, as to every other commodity, is the human labors that have been appropriated in the making of it, the work that produced the linen of shirts and petticoats and bedsheets, the work that transformed bedsheets into sheets of paper.

Marx, in fact, wrote at the moment of crisis in that very process. The massive developments of the paper industry (for the production of newspapers, bureaucratic paperwork, novels, wrapping-paper and so on) had led to an ever greater demand for rags, a demand that could no longer be met. In 1851, the year in which Marx began writing *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Hugh Burgess and Charles Watt made the first commercially useful paper from ground-wood pulp (Hunter 1978: 555). From 1857–60, in the desperate search for replacements for rags, esparto grass was imported from Algeria and it was upon paper made from this grass that the *Illustrated London News*, the *Graphic*, and the *Sphere* were printed. The first newspaper printed entirely on paper from wood pulp was probably the *Boston Weekly Journal*, and that was not until 1863 (Hunter 1978: 565). As late as 1860, rags still formed 88 percent of the total papermaking material (Hunter 1978: 564). Yet by 1868, a year after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, paper was being used for almost every conceivable use: for boxes, cups, plates, wash-bowls, barrels, table tops, window blinds, roofing, towels, napkins, curtains, carpets, machine belts. And in 1869, paper coffins began to be manufactured in the

United States (Hunter 1978: 568). But nowhere were the revolutionary inversions of capitalism more apparent than in the fact that paper, previously made out of the residue of cloth and clothing, now became the material out of which collars, vests, cuffs, aprons, buttons, hats, handkerchiefs, raincoats, corsets, slippers, and petticoats were made. Men's paper collars were given such resounding names as "Lord Byron," "Longfellow," "Shakespeare," and "Dante." In 1869, a paper collar was named after Harriet Beecher Stowe's brother, Henry Ward Beecher, who promoted anti-slavery and women's suffrage. The collar was popularly known as the "Beecher garotte" (Hunter 1978: 385). In 1860, a song called "The Age of Paper" was popular in London music halls; it was sung by Howard Paul "attired in a suit of paper" (Hunter 1978: 386, 388).

But if there was, indeed, a magic to these transformations, there was also a devastating appropriation of the bodies of the living and even of the clothing of the dead. In 1855, Dr. Isaiah Deck, a New York scientist, suggested that paper could be made out of the wrappings of Egyptian mummies. "At this period of sepulture," he wrote, "it is by no means rare to find above 30 pounds weight of linen wrappings in individual mummies." He continued:

The supply of linen rags would not be limited to the mummies of the human species alone; independent of that obtainable from this source, a more than equal amount of cloth could be depended on from the mummies of the sacred bulls, crocodiles, ibides, and cats as all of these animals were embalmed and swathed in a superior quality of linen. . . . [S]ome bandages, from 5 inches to 5 feet wide and 9 yards long, have been stripped from mummies their entire length without tearing. . . .

The question, Will it pay? may be readily answered by assuming the value of rags to be from 4 to 6 cents per pound; in the United States this is considered to be under the market estimate of fine linen rags . . . (Hunter 1978: 384).

A Dr. Waite recalled that when he was a young man, he had indeed made paper out of mummies: he noted that "the rolled-up vestments retained the shape of the mummy, so that when the workmen tried to straighten or unroll the 'cocoon,' as it might be called, it sprang back at once into the shape of the mummy it had encased so long" (Hunter 1978: 383). It is in such surreally grotesque transformations that one can trace the emergence of the commodity from the death

of a material memory. In *Capital*, Marx tried to restore that material memory, a memory literally embodied in the commodity although suppressed as memory.

In *Capital*, Marx wrote about a coat as a commodity—as the abstract “cell-form” of capitalism. He traced the value of that cell-form to the appropriated body of alienated labor. In the process of production, he argued, the commodity takes on an exotic life, even as the body of the worker is reduced to an abstraction. But the actual coats of workers, as of Marx himself, were anything but abstractions. What little wealth they had was stored not as *money* in *banks* but as *things* in the *house*. Well-being could be measured by the coming and going of those things. To be out of pocket was to be forced to strip the body. To be in pocket was to reclothe the body. The extraordinary *intimacy* of the pawnbroker's stock, and the massive preponderance of clothes, can be gauged from the accounts of a large Glasgow pawnbroker in 1836. He had taken as pledges:

539 men's coats; 355 vests; 288 pairs of trousers; 84 pairs of stockings; 1980 women's gowns; 540 petticoats; 132 wrappers [women's loose outer garment]; 123 duffles [thick flannel shawl or coat]; 90 pelisses [women's long coat]; 240 silk handkerchiefs; 294 shirts and shifts; 60 hats; 84 bed ticks; 108 pillows; 206 pairs of blankets; 300 pairs of sheets; 162 bedcovers; 36 tablecloths; 48 umbrellas; 102 Bibles; 204 watches; 216 rings; 48 Waterloo medals (Hudson 1982: 44).

To keep a roof over one's head and food on the table, the intimate materials of the body had to be pawned. And sometimes, one had to choose between house and body. In July 1867, Marx decided to use the £45 set aside for the rent to get back the clothes and watches of his three daughters, so that they could go to stay with Paul Lafargue in France (Marx 1987 [1864–68]: 397). To take one's clothes to the pawnbroker meant to teeter on the edge of social survival. Without “suitable” clothes, Jenny Marx wouldn't go out on the street; without “suitable” clothes, Marx would not work at the British Museum; without “suitable” clothes, the unemployed worker was in no state to look for new employment. To have one's own coat, to wear it on one's back, was to hold on to oneself, even as one held on to one's past and one's future. But it was also to hold onto a memory system that at a moment of crisis could be transformed back into money:

Yesterday I pawned a coat dating back to my Liverpool days in order to buy writing paper (Marx 1983a [1852–55]: 221).

For Marx, as for the workers of whom he wrote, there were no “mere” things. Things were the materials—the clothes, the bedding, the furniture—from which one constructed a life; they were the supplements the undoing of which was the annihilation of the self.

It has become a cliché to say that we should not treat people like things. But it is a cliché that misses the point. What have we done to things to have such contempt for them? And who can afford to have such contempt? Why are prisoners stripped of their clothes, if not to strip them of themselves? Marx, having a precarious hold upon the materials of self-construction, knew the value of his own coat.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University for a fellowship that allowed me to begin work on this project, and for the support and criticisms of the fellows at the Society. Since then, I have benefited from criticisms and suggestions from Crystal Bartolovich, Robert Foster, Webb Keane, Ann Rosalind Jones, Annelies Moors, Adela Pinch, Marc Shell, and Patricia Spyer. Above all, I am indebted to the work of Bill Pietz (cited below) and to conversations with Margreta de Grazia and Matthew Rowlinson. See also Matthew Rowlinson's *fine meditation on the relation between money, commodities, and things* in “Reading *Capital* with Little Nell.”

2. For Marx and commodity fetishism, see Marx 1976 [1867], pp. 163–77. For Marx's assertion of the *necessity* of “alienation” in the positive form of the imbuing of objects with subjectivity through our work upon them and of the imbuing of the subject with objectivity through our materializations, see his “On James Mill,” in Marx 1977, pp. 114–23.

3. For an analysis of the history of the changing relations between subject and object in early modern Europe, see de Grazia, Quilligan, and Stallybrass (1995).

4. For development and critiques of Mauss's theory, see Gregory 1983; Weiner 1985 and 1992; Appadurai 1986; Strathern 1988; Thomas 1991; Derida 1992.

5. My account of the day to day life of the Marx household draws above all on Marx's constant stream of letters to Engels, published in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (1975–). I have also found particularly useful Draper 1985; McLellan 1981; Marx 1973; Seigel 1978; Padover 1978; Kapp 1972.

6. On the 20th February, Marx wrote to Joseph Weydemeyer: “I have been so beset by money troubles that I have not been able to pursue my studies at the Library” (Marx and Engels 1983a [1852–55]: 40).

7. On the Marxes, their debts, and their visits to the pawnshop during the 1850s and 1860s, see, for instance, Marx 1982 [1844–51], pp. 224, 402, 556–57; Marx 1983a [1852–55], pp. 181–82, 216, 385; Marx 1983b [1856–59], pp. 70, 255, 328–30, 360; Marx 1985 [1860–64], pp. 380, 399, 433, 442, 445, 570–71, 577; McLellan (1981), pp. 22–29, 35–36, 149.

8. For Marx's own detailed account of his debts in 1858, see Marx (1983b [1856–59]), pp. 329–30.

9. Both quotes are taken from the OED under "tallyman."

10. Both quotations are taken from the OED under "fustian."

11. See, for example, Marx's description of the death of his wife's uncle as "a very happy event [in English]," Marx 1983a [1852–55]: 526.

12. I would emphasize that I am analysing here the structural relation between the object and the commodity. The actual relations between pawnbrokers and their customers were highly variable. As Tebbutt notes, "the pledge shop was firmly rooted in the community and trusted in a way which external organizations [like banks] were not" (Tebbutt 1983: 17). And there was sometimes an air of carnival at the Saturday gatherings at the pawnshop (see Ross 1993: 47).

13. On clothes and memory, see Stallybrass 1993: 35–50.

14. The inscription of loss within the act of purchase was a feature of everyday life for those who regularly used the pawnbroker. Melanie Tebbutt notes that the poor "had, in fact, a qualitatively different view of material resources, which they regarded as a tangible asset to be drawn on in periods of financial difficulty. When buying sales goods the poor habitually asked what they would fetch if offered in pawn, and frequently confessed they were influenced in their choice by the articles' potential pledge value" (Tebbutt 1983: 16). See also Annelies Moors's essay in this collection. She notes that richer Palestinian women tend to buy jewelry made of gold of relatively low value but that has been highly worked. Poorer women, on the other hand, tend to buy jewelry made of unworked gold of higher value, since they need to get the highest possible value for it if and when they pawn it.

15. For a fascinating analogy, see again Annelies Moors's essay.

16. Not only did women do most of the pawning; it was their own clothes that they most commonly pawned to raise money for the household. In a breakdown of the clothes pawned in 1836, 58 percent of garments clearly gender-identified were women's, while a significant percentage of the rest could have been either men's or women's. See Tebbutt 1983: 33.

17. In fact, despite the ideological association of Jews and pawnbroking, pawnbrokers were not mainly Jewish in nineteenth-century England (see Hudson 1982: 39).

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