



II. THE COMMODITY

AS A

SPECTACLE

For it is only as the universal category of total social being that the commodity can be understood in its authentic essence. It is only in this context that reification which arises from the commodity relation acquires a decisive meaning, as much for the objective evolution of society as for the attitude of men towards it, for the submission of their consciousness to the forms in which this reification is expressed. . . . This submission also grows because of the fact that the more the rationalization and mechanization of the work process increases, the more the activity of the worker loses its character as activity and becomes a contemplative attitude.

Lukacs
History and Class Consciousness.

In the essential movement of the spectacle, which consists of taking up within itself all that existed in human activity *in a fluid state*, in order to possess it in a coagulated state, as things which have become the exclusive value by their *formulation in negative* of lived value, we recognize our old enemy, *the commodity*, who knows so well how to seem at first glance something trivial and obvious, while on the contrary it is so complex and so full of metaphysical subtleties.

This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things," which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible *par excellence*.

The world at once present and absent which the spectacle *makes visible* is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived. And the world of the commodity is thus shown *as it is*, because its movement is identical to the *estrangement* of men among themselves and vis-a-vis their global product.

The loss of quality so evident at all levels of spectacular language,



of the objects it praises and the behavior it regulates, merely translates the fundamental traits of the real production which brushes reality aside: the commodity-form is through and through equal to itself, the category of the quantitative. It is the quantitative which the commodity-form develops, and it can only develop within the quantitative.

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This development which excludes the qualitative is, as development, itself subject to a passage into the qualitative: the spectacle signifies that it has crossed the threshold of its own abundance; this is as yet true only locally at some points, but is already true on the universal scale which is the original context of the commodity, a context which its practical movement, encompassing the Earth as a world market, has verified.

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The development of productive forces has been the real unconscious history which built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups as conditions of survival, and extended these conditions: the economic basis of all their enterprises. Within a natural economy, the commodity sector represented a surplus of survival. The production of commodities, which implies the exchange of varied products among independent producers, could for a long time remain craft production, contained within a marginal economic function where its quantitative truth was still masked. However, when commodity production met the social conditions of large scale commerce and of the accumulation of capitals, it seized the total domination of the economy. The entire economy then became what the commodity had shown itself to be during the course of this conquest: a process of quantitative development. This incessant deployment of economic power in the form of the commodity, which transformed human labor into commodity-labor, into *wage-labor*, cummulativey led to an abundance in which the primary question of survival is undoubtedly resolved, but in such a way that it is constantly rediscovered; it is posed over again each time at a higher level. Economic growth frees societies from the natural pressure which demanded their direct struggle for survival, but at that point it is from their liberator that they are not liberated. The *independence* of the commodity was extended to the entire economy over which it rules. The economy transforms the world, but transforms it only into a world of economy. The pseudo-nature within which human labor is alienated demands that it be *served* ad infinitum, and this service, being judged and absolved only by itself, in fact acquires the totality of socially permissible efforts and projects as its servants. The abundance of com-

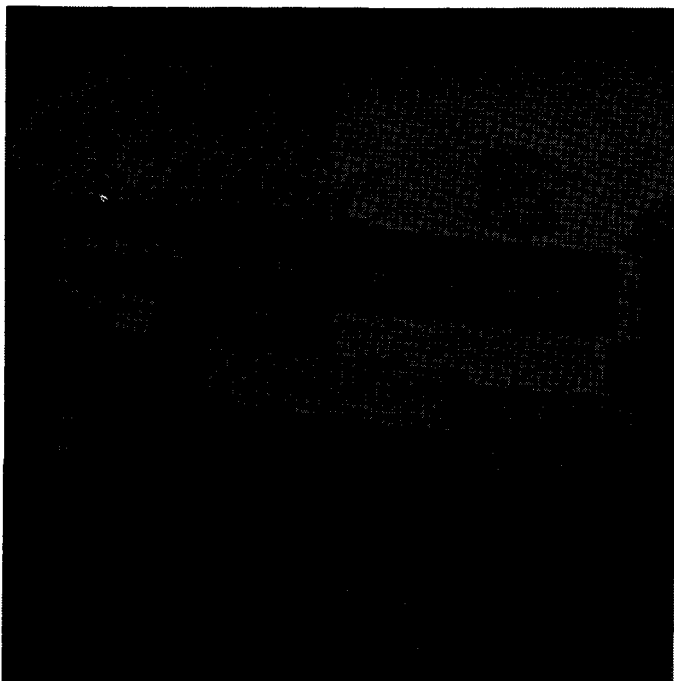
modities, that is, the commodity relation, can be no more than augmented survival.

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The domination of the commodity was at first exerted over the economy in an obscure manner; the economy itself, the material basis of social life, remained unperceived and not understood, like the familiar which remains unknown. In a society where the concrete commodity is rare or unusual, it is the apparent domination of money which presents itself as an emissary armed with full powers which speaks in the name of an unknown force. With the industrial revolution, the division of labor in manufactures, and mass production for the world market, the commodity appears in fact as a power which comes really to *occupy* social life. It is then that political economy takes shape, as the dominant science and as the science of domination.

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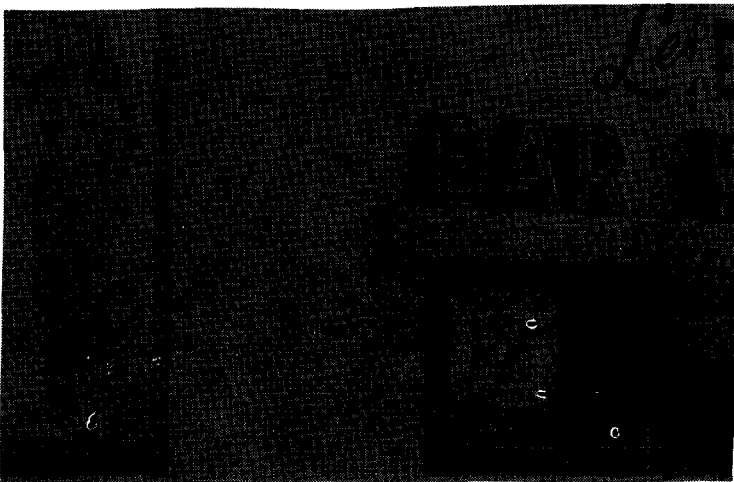
The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. The relation to the commodity is not only visible, but one no longer sees anything but it: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively. In the least industrialized places, its domina-



tion is already present with a few star commodities and as imperialist domination by zones which are ahead in the development of productivity. In these advanced zones, social space is invaded by a continuous superimposition of geological layers of commodities. At this point in the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption becomes for the masses a supplementary duty to alienated production. It is *all the sold labor* of a society which globally becomes the *total commodity* for which the cycle must be continued. For this to be done, it is necessary for this total commodity to return as a fragment to the fragmented individual, absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as an ensemble. Thus it is here that the specialized science of domination must in turn specialize: it fragments itself into sociology, psychotechnics, cybernetics, semiology, etc., watching over the self-regulation of all the levels of the process.

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Whereas in the primitive phase of capitalist accumulation, "political economy sees in the *proletarian* only the *worker*," who must receive the minimum indispensable for the conservation of his labor power without ever considering him "in his leisure, in his humanity," this position of the ideas of the dominant class is reversed as soon as the degree of abundance attained in the production of commodities demands a surplus of collaboration from the worker. This worker suddenly washed of the total scorn which is clearly shown to him by all the modalities of organization and surveillance of production, finds himself each day, outside of production, seemingly treated as a grown up, with a zealous politeness under the mask of a consumer. *Then the humanism of the commodity* takes charge of the "leisure and humanity" of the worker, simply because political economy can and must now dominate these spheres *as political economy*. Thus the "perfected denial of man" has taken charge of the totality of human existence.



The spectacle is a permanent opium war whose aim is to make acceptable the identification of goods with commodities, and of satisfaction with survival augmenting according to its own laws. But if consumable survival is something which must always increase, this is because it never ceases to *contain privation*. If there is nothing beyond augmented survival, no point where it might stop its growth, this is because it is not beyond privation, but is privation become enriched.



With automation, which is both the most advanced sector of modern industry and the model where its practice is perfectly summed up, the world of the commodity must surmount the following contradiction: the technical instrumentation which objectively eliminates labor must at the same time *conserve labor as a commodity* and as the only source of the commodity. In order for automation (or any other less extreme form of increasing the productivity of labor) not to diminish the actual social labor necessary for the entire society, new jobs must be created. The tertiary sector, services, represents an immense extension of continuous rows of the army of distribution, and a eulogy of present-day commodities: the tertiary sector is thus a mobilization of supplementary forces which opportunely encounters the necessity for such an organization of rear-guard labor in the very artificiality of the needs for such commodities.

Exchange value could originate only as an agent of use value, but its victory by means of its own weapons created the conditions for its autonomous domination. Mobilizing all human use and seizing the monopoly of its satisfaction, exchange value has ended up by *directing use*. The process of exchange became identified with all possible use and reduced use to the mercy of exchange. Exchange value is the condottiere of use value, which ends up carrying on the war for itself.

The tendency of use value to fall, this constant of capitalist economy, develops a new form of privation within augmented survival. The new privation is not liberated to any extent from the old penury since it requires the participation of most men as wage workers in the endless pursuit of its attainment, and since everyone knows he must submit or die. The reality of this blackmail lies in the fact that use in its most impoverished form (eating, inhabiting) exists only to the extent that it is imprisoned within the illusory wealth of augmented survival, the real basis for the acceptance of illusion in general in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.

Use value, which was implicitly contained in exchange value, must now be explicitly proclaimed, in the inverted reality of the spectacle, precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy; and because a pseudo-justification becomes necessary for counterfeit life.

The spectacle is the other side of money; it is the general abstract equivalent of all commodities. But if money has dominated society as the representation of the central equivalence, namely as the exchangeable property of the various goods whose uses remained incomparable,

the spectacle is its developed modern complement, in which the totality of the commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the totality of the society can be and do. The spectacle is the money which *one only looks at*, because in the spectacle the totality of use is already exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not only the servant of *pseudo-use*, it is already in itself the pseudo-use of life.

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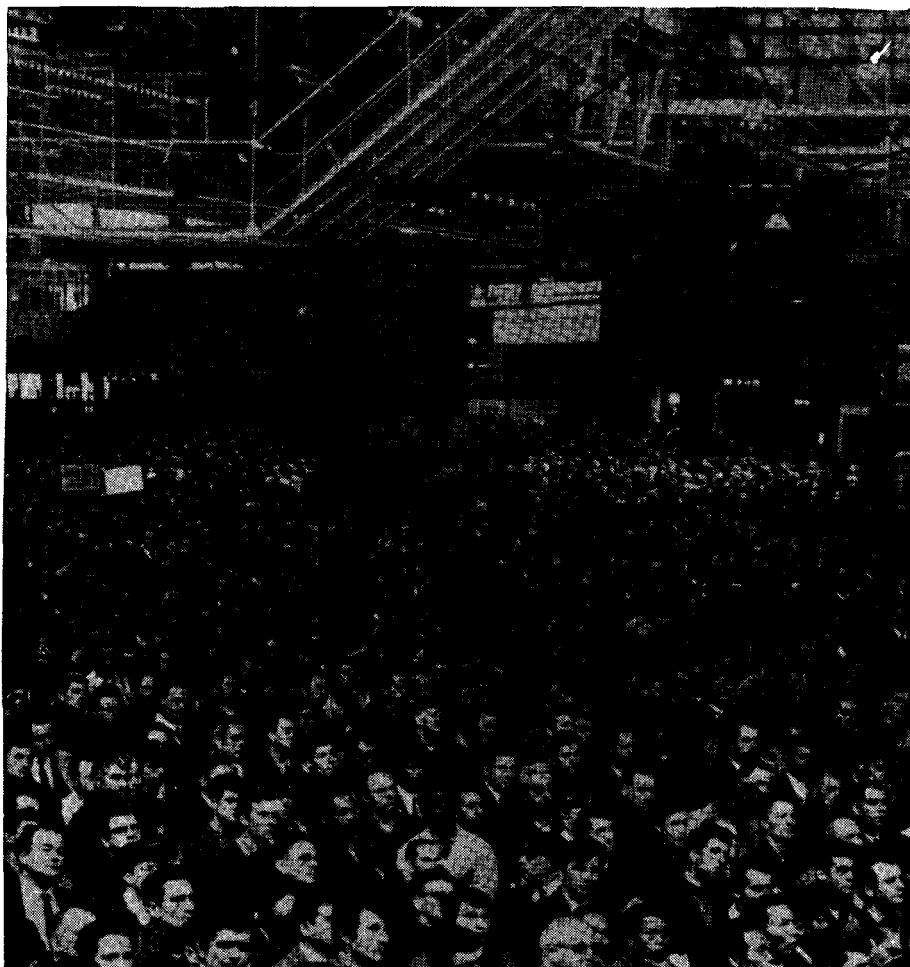
At the moment of *economic* abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product. Capital is no longer the invisible center which directs the mode of production: accumulation spreads it to the periphery in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.

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The victory of the autonomous economy must at the same time be its defeat. The forces which it has unleashed eliminate the *economic necessity* which was the immutable basis of earlier societies. When economic necessity is replaced by the necessity for boundless economic development, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But the autonomous economy separates itself forever from basic need to the extent that it emerges from the *social unconscious* which depended on it without knowing it. "All that is conscious is used up. That which is unconscious remains unalterable. But once freed, does it not fall to ruins in its turn?" (Freud)

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When society discovers that it depends on the economy, the economy, in effect, depends on it. This subterranean power, which has grown to the point of seeming to be sovereign, has lost its power. That which was the economic *it* must become the *I*. The subject can only emerge from society, namely ~~from~~ the struggle within it. The subject's possible existence hangs on the outcome of the class struggle which shows itself to be the product and the producer of the economic foundation of history.



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The consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness are identically the project which, in its negative form, seeks the abolition of classes, that is, the direct possession by the workers over all the moments of their activity. Its *opposite* is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world which it has created.

