

On Marxist Ideas of Change

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Some early contradiction found in Fredy Perlman which has continued unresolved throughout my reflection upon *The Reproduction of Everyday Life*

I used 150 minutes of my life reading this text and 180 minutes in writing a response (with 120 minutes of revision).

Perlman died in 1985. Some people continue to read his writings. As it is essential to the marxist theory of fetishism we should pause here and consider this: we, as living people, continue to read words written by a dead person and use the order given to them by their author as a means for illuminating or inhibiting, that is structuring, our reflections on the undertakings of our lives in the present. How and why do things produced by others *before* in moments other than the present come to impact on current relations between living individuals? Is this *impact* systematic?

In his essays *Commodity Fetishism* and *The Reproduction of Everyday Life* Perlman assesses how things (seemingly), in the form of commodities, dictate to the activities of lives lived in the present.

This pamphlet written in 1969 remains the best theoretical introduction to the frame set by Marx's analysis of the capitalist social relation. The best introduction because already, in its repetitious phrasing, Perlman might be understood to be somewhat discontented with such a frame. The theoretical account of how commodities dictate to present day life and how present day life is directed towards the reproduction of life directed towards commodities arrives at a perplexing theoretical crossroads when it comes to address the same problem at different levels. At one level, the surplus labour contained within commodities is considered to be socially progressive, an objective material condition of the present (and historically of communism itself), whilst at another, the interruption of lived activity by the

commodity-fetish functions as a mystification of that lived activity facilitating the reproduction of the same conditions.

Perlman begins by asking what is typically an invisible question, the question that is never addressed in ordinary social activity, namely: what is it exactly that causes individual human beings to remain within the boundaries of their society? Perlman begins his essay with three assertive paragraphs:

The everyday practical activity of tribesmen reproduces, or perpetuates, a tribe. This reproduction is not merely physical, but social as well. Through their daily activities the tribesmen do not merely reproduce a group of human beings; they reproduce a tribe, namely a particular social form within which this group of human beings performs specific activities in a specific manner...

...The everyday activity of slaves reproduces slavery. Through their daily activities, slaves do not merely reproduce themselves and their masters physically; they also reproduce the instruments with which the master represses them, and their own habits of submission to the master's authority. To men who live in a slave society, the master-slave relation seems like a natural and eternal relation. However, men are not born masters or slaves...

...The practical everyday activity of wageworkers reproduces wage labor and capital...

He goes on to examine: the nature of the "commodity fetish"; the transformation of living activity into capital; the storage and accumulation of human activity. Over and over again, he reiterates the marxist analysis of the abstract (in this case capitalist) relation of human activity in a social context to the accumulations of activity in *things*. And yet, despite this incantational form of explanation, the constant hammering of the same formula, or perhaps because of it, the reader does not get the impression that Perlman is entirely happy with the limits of his explanation. There is something else in the relation which escapes the theory of commodity fetishism, something human which resists its portrayal in the critique of political economy. Perlman in this text has hit a boundary but is not prepared to theorise it as that would imply a departure from received Value Theory, in response, he is compelled to repeat the same spell over and over so as to drown out his own intelligence.

On page one he writes:

Under capitalism, daily life consists of related activities which reproduce and expand the capitalist form of social activity. The sale of labor-

time for a price (a wage), the embodiment of labor time in commodities (saleable goods, both tangible and intangible), the consumption of tangible and intangible commodities (such as consumer goods and spectacles)-these activities which characterize daily life under capitalism are not manifestations of “human nature,” nor are they imposed on men by forces beyond their control.

On page two he writes:

The things the worker buys with his wages are first of all consumer goods which enable him to survive, to reproduce his labor-power so as to be able to continue selling it; and they are spectacles, objects for passive admiration. He consumes and admires the products of human activity passively. He does not exist in the world as an active agent who transforms it. but as a helpless impotent spectator he may call this state of powerless admiration “happiness,” and since labor is painful, he may desire to be “happy,” namely inactive, all his life (a condition similar to being born dead). The commodities, the spectacles, consume him; he uses up living energy in passive admiration; he is consumed by things. In this sense, the more he has, the less he is. (An individual can surmount this death-in-life through marginal creative activity; but the population cannot, except by abolishing the capitalist form of practical activity, by abolishing wagemlabor and thus de-alienating creative activity.)

On page three he writes:

By selling their labor, by alienating their activity, people daily reproduce the personifications of the dominant forms of activity under capitalism, they reproduce the wage-laborer and the capitalist. They do not merely reproduce the individuals physically, but socially as well; they reproduce individuals who are sellers of labor-power, and individuals who are owners of means of production; they reproduce the individuals as well as the specific activities, the sale as well as the ownership.

Every time people perform an activity they have not themselves defined and do not control, every time they pay for goods they produced with money they received in exchange for their alienated activity, every time they passively admire the products of their own activity as alien objects procured by their money, they give new life to Capital and annihilate their own lives.

On page four he writes:

Nor does the power of Capital reside in the material receptacles in which the labor of past generations is stored, since the potential energy stored in these receptacles can be liberated by the activity of living people whether or not the receptacles are Capital, namely alien property. Without living activity, the collection of objects which constitute society's Capital would merely be a scattered heap of assorted artefacts with no life of their own, and the "owners" of Capital would merely be a scattered assortment of uncommonly uncreative people (by training) who surround themselves with bits of paper in a vain attempt to resuscitate memories of past grandeur. The only "power" of Capital resides in the daily activities of living people; this "power" consists of the disposition of people to sell their daily activities in exchange for money, and to give up control over the products of their own activity and of the activity of earlier generations.

And in between these paragraphs he reproduces other paragraphs dominated by the same motifs — in fact, the entirety of the essay reproduces a veritable mid-den of the same paragraph shell in different words, each succeeding paragraph a reproduction, a reworking, a discarding and retaining of, the previous paragraph. Something is lost, something is thrown away, something is retained and the theory of commodity fetishism, like the Large Hadron Collider, is attempting to grasp at the Higgs particle of human stickiness. Perlman endlessly recycles his own formality, and whilst he is able to record the co-ordinates of this connection between us all, it also becomes apparent, that in his version, the theory of commodity fetishism is an inadequate means for explaining everything. Even so, the theory is basically correct. Perlman accurately describes human activity under capitalist conditions. But the questions remain of how and why people behave as they do, and how and why the memory of the dead is retained by the living in the form of *things*.

One of the problems of his account is the underlying political assumptions which inevitably distort the analysis — he is pushing too hard to make fetishism antithetical to life. Perlman's writing has a strong instinct towards the light, he pushes up strongly from the depths towards the surface. The political implication of his version proposes the coming to dominance of living relations over dead things as means to *overcome* fetishism... but there is something else there. The weeds of the depths tangle around his ankles and the greater the effort to kick free of them the tighter they bind him to a contradiction. Marx curses humanity in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

The marxist role for consciousness, via expropriation, functions something like the grip impulse of a hand on a hot door handle in a burning house. Expropriation, the compulsory use by the living of the dead, is in the end not so much a *lived activity* as would be a violent relinquishment. The question of historical discontinuities and abrupt veerings away, does not occur in the marxist account. The marxist contradiction is set out like a classic double bind (i.e. the conflict in commands/impulses exist at different levels of understanding) on one level we are told that living activity must return to itself and break free from the mystifications of fetishism. On the other hand, Perlman writes, “The historical role of Capitalism, a role which was performed by people who accepted the legitimacy of others to dispose of their lives, consisted precisely of storing human activity in material receptacles by means of forced labor.” Marxist theory cannot relinquish the notion of history (and thus development) the stasis of the class struggle as it exists within the capitalist social relation is like a swirling current within a river of history which precedes, unconsciously, at another level. Within the capitalist frame, the proletariat must recognise the limitations of their existence, within the historical frame, the limitations of their existence are the very conditions for the proletariat’s escape from capitalism.

The limitations placed by the frame of the marxist discourse on our understanding human society is starkly apparent in Perlman’s version (not least because he seems to radically revise the theory in his book *Against History, Against Leviathan*). Perlman’s account of fetishism exists on the very edge of itself – and thus becomes a fetishised boundary. Evidently, the anti-political communist is most concerned with threshold experiences and in particular with the radical departures of once ‘good’ marxists into other theoretical/ideological frameworks (Perlman, Camatte, Wildcat) but for the moment I would like to examine two critical fragments in Perlman’s text so as to further examine the mechanism of surplus labour becoming fetish.

Nor does the power of Capital reside in the material receptacles in which the labor of past generations is stored, since the potential energy stored in these receptacles can be liberated by the activity of living people whether or not the receptacles are Capital, namely alien property. Without living activity, the collection of objects which constitute society’s Capital would merely be a scattered heap of assorted

artefacts with no life of their own, and the “owners” of Capital would merely be a scattered assortment of uncommonly uncreative people (by training) who surround themselves with bits of paper in a vain attempt to resuscitate memories of past grandeur. The only “power” of Capital resides in the daily activities of living people; this “power” consists of the disposition of people to sell their daily activities in exchange for money, and to give up control over the products of their own activity and of the activity of earlier generations.

We will leave aside for the moment the question of whether it is possible for human beings not to mediate their relations between each other via things and still remain human beings. Instead, let’s concentrate on the limitations of Perlman’s discourse. He talks of ‘nature’ at the beginning of the text, he contrasts humans with bees; he says it is not ‘natural’ for a human being to be born a slave, or a master, or a worker, or a capitalist, he says it seems natural but it is not. But then, nor is it accidental that an individual is born into the circumstances that he is – after all, human beings are always born into a specific circumstance, they are never born into abstract potentiality. *Living activity* as an ontological [category] conditionally exists as a flight, in relation to, the workday – it is a soaring away from, rather than a first principle. At points, Perlman’s account becomes almost moralistic, he writes:

The things the worker buys with his wages are first of all consumer goods which enable him to survive, to reproduce his laborpower so as to be able to continue selling it; and they are spectacles, objects for passive admiration. He consumes and admires the products of human activity passively. He does not exist in the world as an active agent who transforms it. but as a helpless impotent spectator he may call this state of powerless admiration “happiness,” and since labor is painful, he may desire to be “happy,” namely inactive, all his life (a condition similar to being born dead).

His disgust as he contrasts ‘passivity’ with action is almost palpable. But this disgust is also the residue of a thing, an intangible, immaterial product, i.e. a received notion of human existence to which he (for the moment) ‘passively’ subscribes. At this juncture, rather than berating others for their conformity and their desire for rest he might have more critically interrogated his concept of socialising processes, which might then have raised his work above the level of propaganda (i.e. beyond the fetishised distribution of *truth*). If he had escaped orthodoxy at this juncture, it is likely that he would never have found a readership, and his work would not have connected to a *tradition* to carry it forward.

Already, in Hegel, we are acquainted with the idea that individuals do not randomly 'bind together' and produce their conditions directly but that the frame for their existence is set prior to their birth. Men are not born into 'nature' but they are born into *second* nature. They tend to subjectively reproduce (and in limited circumstances plot their advance within) their conditions according to the actions of a 'natural' tendency to become inseparable from the most familiar conditions. In evolutionary terms, they adapt to their conditions and set their life goals according to their environment. As far as they are concerned there is no *outside*, they do not consider the possibility of stepping outside of their lives and changing the conditions but seek rather to succeed within the boundaries that are imposed upon them. People only seek to intervene at the level of *objective* circumstances when those circumstances become too unstable to bear. Perlman fails to emphasise the obvious: that there is no absolute contrast between *lived activity* and *dead activity* but rather a constant process is set in motion where the activity of living people combines with the tools and objects that they are provided with. The problem occurs at the level of proportion of the combining together of past and present activities.

The marxist discourse is based upon a set of assumptions concerning history and development and on the outcome of the accumulative patterning of lived life upon dead labour – the theory tends to bend its findings to fit in with its assumptions. A more appropriate theory for the explanation of harmful fetishism might be found in the evolutionary-biological account of 'addiction' which is understood as a species' over (or surplus) adaptation to a highly particularised environment. The overly-adapted human being is addicted to the conditions in which he lives and seeks, like the sufferer of obsessive compulsive disorder, to reproduce exactly those conditions with which they are most familiar (just as a particular species of bird builds always the same nest). In the case of the over-adapted human being his/her relation to the world is characterised as the total dominance of a system of dead acts (which we will call 'second nature') over his ability to improvise and add his/her own individuality to the pattern of the system (improvisation here supplants Perlman's idealisation of 'creativity'). The *historical role* is thus transformed from the realisation of an idealised lived activity into the release of individuals from the historical patterning that binds them. Or put in reverse order, the historical task is to relax the patterns which bind individuals into restricted and overly specialised behaviours so as to allow them to adapt to and improvise within a wider set of circumstances. The wider set of circumstances an individual feels at home in, the greater his chances of feeling at home. In this example, tools are deployed by individuals to modify the social relation into which they have been born, whereas under present conditions, human beings are used as tools so as to realise the continuation of the objective environment.

The daily transformation of living activity into Capital is mediated by things, it is not carried out by the things. The fetish worshipper does not know this; for him labor and land, instruments and money, entrepreneurs and bankers, are all “factors” and “agents.” When a hunter wearing an amulet downs a deer with a stone, he may consider the amulet an essential “factor” in downing the deer and even in providing the deer as an object to be downed. If he is a responsible and well-educated fetish worshipper, he will devote his attention to his amulet, nourishing it with care and admiration; in order to improve the material conditions of his life, he will improve the way he wears his fetish, not the way he throws the stone; in a bind, he may even send his amulet to “hunt” for him. His own daily activities are not transparent to him: when he eats well, he fails to see that it is his own action of throwing the stone, and not the action of the amulet, that provided his food; when he starves, he fails to see that it is his own action of worshipping the amulet instead of hunting, and not the wrath of his fetish, that causes his starvation.

The fetishism of commodities and money, the mystification of one’s daily activities, the religion of everyday life which attributes living activity to inanimate things, is not a mental caprice born in men’s imaginations; it has its origin in the character of social relations under capitalism. Men do in fact relate to each other through things; the fetish is in fact the occasion for which they act collectively, and through which they reproduce their activity. But it is not the fetish that performs the activity. It is not Capital that transforms raw materials, nor Capital that produces goods. If living activity did not transform the materials, these would remain untransformed, inert, dead matter. If men were not disposed to continue selling their living activity, the impotence of Capital would be revealed; Capital would cease to exist; its last remaining potency would be the power to remind people of a bypassed form of everyday life characterized by daily universal prostitution.

Before I address Perlman’s account of ‘mystification’ above, it might be useful here to briefly outline the setting of individuals within social context and the question of the nature of socialisation in different social formations. Broadly speaking, traditional societies, socialise individuals by means of *initiation*; in this case socialisation involves a ritualised access to tradition — the individual finds himself placed within a particular narrative of society which locates its meaning in the past. Socialisation in capitalist society, by contrast, takes the form of establishing in the individual an awareness of *potentiality*, thus through education the individual be-

comes aware of his opportunities within society (I cannot resist adding here that opportunities real means exploitable opportunities). The present experience of the tribal initiate is woven into a narrated past whereas the school leaver is woven into a logistical future. Just as the past is set hard in traditional society (there are no new interpretations) so the future in capitalist society is predictable and constant (one chooses from an established set of careers, one does not invent a new way of life).

Underlying Perlman's account of the tribesman is the prioritising of a utilitarian perception of existence and an objectified or biological understanding of the means of survival. Perlman attempts to separate the tribesman's activity (which is seen to be some base level quantification of existence) from the erroneous beliefs of the tribesman concerning his activity as represented in the fetish. Perlman does not trouble himself either to understand what the function of the fetish is, nor the set of relations of which the hunting is only an expression. In fact he mislocates use-value altogether in the essay and sets up instead a hypostasized opposition between what is lived and what is not. He writes:

...the sold creative power, or sold daily activity, takes the form of labor. Labor is a historically specific form of human activity. Labor is abstract activity which has only one property: it is marketable, it can be sold for a given quantity of money. Labor is indifferent activity: indifferent to the particular task performed and indifferent to the particular subject to which the task is directed. Digging, printing and carving are different activities, but all three are labor in capitalist society. Labor is simply "earning money." Living activity which takes the form of labor is a means to earn money. Life becomes a means of survival.

This ironic reversal is not the dramatic climax of an imaginative novel; it is a fact of daily life in capitalist society. Survival, namely self-preservation and reproduction, is not the means to creative practical activity, but precisely the other way around. Creative activity in the form of labor, namely sold activity, is a painful necessity for survival; labor is the means to self-preservation and reproduction.

The sale of living activity brings about another reversal. Through sale, the labor of an individual becomes the "property" of another, it is appropriated by another, it comes under the control of another. In other words, a person's activity becomes the activity of another, the activity of its owner; it becomes alien to the person who performs it. Thus one's life, the accomplishments of an individual in the world, the difference which his life makes in the life of humanity, are not only

transformed into labor, a painful condition for survival; they are transformed into alien activity, activity performed by the buyer of that labor. In capitalist society, the architects, the engineers, the laborers, are not builders; the man who buys their labor is the builder; their projects, calculations and motions are alien to them; their living activity, their accomplishments, are his.

The attempt to deactualise human relations and disentangle 'real' needs from 'surplus' needs is perhaps the most nineteenth century aspect of Marxist theory. At one level the urge to historicise the human essence produces a being that is infinitely flexible with regards to its changing environment at another level it cannot get past the implication of its own theory that capitalist needs are satisfied by capitalist production. Perlman's theory of fetishism fails to articulate the relation of the tribesman to the world through the fetish and thus makes the hunter unreal to the point of abstraction. It is the fetish itself that bestows humanity onto the hunter, gives him character, liberates him from the eternal cause and effect reactions of the of natural world. It is the fetish's capacity to free human activity from utility that Perlman fails to locate. The relation of the individual hunter to the tribe of which he is a member is expressed through the fetish. It is the fetish that encapsulates or compresses those relations and converts them into a transportable material/psychological amalgam — the fetish does not mystify the nature of some biological need to survive through hunting but contains within it the memory or the *reason* why he is undertaking this activity and in doing so, this sustains his identity. The fetish identifies what it is that the hunter is 'defending'. The alternative, a proposition of pure immanence as expressed in lived activity produces a condition of memorylessness and immediate sets of determined responses. Lived activity, without 'her most sonorous gems' is pure drudgery, without the fetish, the *personification* of the surplus, there is no means to raise one's thoughts away from and beyond what is immediately given.

The fetish, or overdetermined object, compresses long lists of associations into a mere symbol, this frees the present from having to consciously remember the exact details of every event. The fetish also, because of the immense depths which it contains (Perlman writes, "...when an industrial worker runs an electric lathe, he uses products of the labor of generations of physicists, inventors, electrical engineers, lathe makers"), is able to access, prompt and liberate, unprecedented associations in *lived activity* which otherwise would have remained dormant... hence: Spin the Bottle, Sortes Vergilianae, and other object-conditioned *impulse* behaviours. For this reason the account of the 'behaviour' of the commodity within human society within Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project is more nuanced and therefore more real than the fetishised version described in Perlman's polemic. In Benjamin's de-

scription we again encounter the potential of *release* of patterned determinations through their supplantation of new sets of associations, Hegel describes an ideal form of this release:

Hence it is that, in the case of various kinds of knowledge, we find that what in former days occupied the energies of men of mature mental ability sinks to the level of information, exercises, and even pastimes, for children; and in this educational progress we can see the history of the world's culture delineated in faint outline.

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