

On 'Essence' and 'Appearance'

Marx once observed¹ that '*alle Wissenschaft wäre überflüssig, wenn die Erscheinungsform und das Wesen der Dinge unmittelbar zusammenfielen*' – that all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance and the essence of things coincided directly. If accepted as true, the remark would suggest that what *science* is is that which is necessary to bridge this non-coincidence of the essence and appearance of things (it should be remembered that the context of Marx's comment is a scabrous criticism of 'vulgar' political economy for its inability to escape the 'estranged world of appearances' of economic conditions). But this definition of 'science' is of course in turn dependent on how we understand the terms 'essence' and 'appearance', and therefore on how we might conceive of how and why their non-coincidence might come about should it do so.

That Marx's intent is epistemo-ontologically generalised, and not sociologically local, reserved to a field no broader than the operation of the relations of the capitalist mode of production, seems itself to be revealed by the numerous natural scientific analogies he uses in his economic work as illustrations.

In *Capital* volume 1, Marx commented that 'a scientific analysis of competition is possible only if we can grasp the inner nature of capital, just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are intelligible only to someone who is acquainted with their real motions, which are not perceptible to the senses';² while in *Wages, Price and Profit* he remarked that '[i]t is [a] [...] paradox that the earth moves round the sun, and that water consists of two highly inflammable gases. Scientific truth is always paradox, if judged by everyday experience, which catches only the delusive appearance of things.'³

Again in volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx noted that in

the production of commodities, [...] that the specific social character of private labours carried on independently of each other consists in the equality as human labour, and, in the product, assumes the form of the existence of value, appears to those caught up in the relations of commodity production (and this is true both before and after the above-mentioned scientific discovery) to be just as ultimately valid as the fact that the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration.⁴

There are a number of distinct ideas entangled here. The first, in relation to the movement of the heavenly bodies, is that the 'apparent', without knowledge of the 'real', may not appear 'intelligible'; in addition, the knowledge of the real necessary to render it so is not 'directly perceptible' through appearance. Another is that the 'real' may actually appear to *contradict* the apparent (appear as 'paradox'), if consideration of the former is given on the terms of the latter: appearance is 'delusive' since it – again – on its own does not permit us knowledge of scientific 'truth'. Finally, once the truth, the real, *is* known, both its appearance and its essence remain as they were.

It is tempting to take the distinction between the 'real' – essence – and the 'apparent' – form of appearance – as functions of material reality itself: to consider reality as geologically stratified, consisting in an 'outer' surface of appearance and an inner 'core' of essence, the latter generating the former and the former deluding us as to the nature of the latter. But such an interpretation would not only be ontologically impermissible, it would seem to run counter to Marx's own intentions in his economic theory.⁵

¹ In *Capital* volume 3 (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 956.

² *Capital* volume 1 (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 433.

³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London, 1968), pp. 206-7

⁴ *Capital* volume 1, p. 167.

⁵ Marx does frequently use words like 'surface' and 'depths' in relation to notions of essence and appearance; I suggest that he is using these terms *metaphorically*, however.

Ontologically, conceiving of material reality as differentiated between a core and a surface, the former ontologically categorical, and generating the latter, and the latter through which our contact with reality is experienced, poses the unanswerable question of how our knowledge of the *real* would be wrought. This is the same problematic posed by Kant, for whom reality was composed of an inherently unknowable noumenal realm ('things-in-themselves') and a realm of the phenomenal made up of sense-impressions. This *is* a paradox, for the presumption that we can say nothing categorical about something is precisely to say something categorical about it. This cannot be what Marx wants to say.

Yet the assumption is a common one. Addressing the above examples from Marx, Gerry Cohen wrote that '[t]he ideas of air as a uniform substance and of the sun rising and setting [...] come from [...] how the air and the sun present themselves.'⁶ But sun and air do not present *themselves* to *us*; *we* perceive *them*. Appearance is not generated by the things themselves; it is a function of *our own* sensory engagement with them.

But neither is it the case that our engagement with things is *merely* sensory. What is constitutive to human beings is our capacity to *think*, to regulate our own relationship with the material world through the manipulation of sense-impression so as to be able to form an abstract and theoretical representation of material reality in *thought*.⁷ That part of human knowledge which is not merely instinctual is formed through the self-conscious *processing* of sense impression. This is of course the solution to the Kantian problematic of the inherent unknowability of the realm of the noumenal: 'phenomenal' knowledge is phenomenal not because it *excludes* noumenal knowledge but in virtue of being *how* the noumenal *is* known: 'direct' (i.e. unmediated by the processing of sense-impression) knowledge of things-in-themselves is indeed impossible, but it is impossible because it conceives knowledge-in-itself as separate from the active human subject, knowing without a knower, i.e. it is not just impossible but a contradiction in terms. If there is opposition between the noumenal and the phenomenal it is a *dialectical* opposition, the content of which is given by human engagement with material reality.

For Cohen, the sense-impressions we receive mislead us in the sense that mirages do:⁸ although we really do register what we really do perceive what we really perceive is not necessarily consonant with what really is. Yet, for example, while the perception of air as uniform and homogenous may be the consequence of nasal insensibility, this example is not set out by Marx as proof of the *delusional* nature of appearances but precisely to illustrate their *reality*: neither the nature of air nor that of its perception, Marx argues, is in one jot altered by the attainment of knowledge of its composition. It is not that the perception is misleading; it is that it is partial, and incomplete.

Between the fact, on the one hand, that hydrogen is combustible and oxygen necessary for combustion, and, on the other, that water is a liquid suitable for quenching both fire and thirst, there is no paradox. The paradox arises when it is discovered that water is in fact composed of hydrogen and oxygen, in other words by the acquiring of further knowledge. But once the mechanisms of chemical bonding are in turn discovered,

⁶ G A Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 2000), p. 399.

⁷ 'A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realises his own purpose in those materials.' *Capital* volume 1, p. 284. In addition, the way that human beings interact with and regulate their relation with the material world is through social, not individual, practice, whether this is perceived as such or not. Human engagement with material reality takes place *social practice*. 'In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.' Karl Marx, 'Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 425.

⁸ Rather than as 'hallucinations': *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 398.

this paradox too disappears.⁹ Again, appearances do no *mislead* us: partial discoveries thrown up by the study of appearances in turn throw up apparent paradoxes, paradoxes that arise because of the partiality of the discoveries themselves, but in turn these apparent paradoxes themselves prompt further investigation and a further deepening of knowledge: old paradoxes disappear; new ones emerge.

Appearance, in itself, does not mislead. If we consider the passage of the sun across the sky, from dusk till dawn, what we perceive – the appearance – is the movement, the ‘sense-impression’. It is not false; but neither do we stop there. We think. We form a *theoretical representation* of this impression: we imagine what there might be to *cause* that appearance. But this theoretical practice does not take place in an intellectual vacuum. Theoretical concepts are *manufactured*, not harvested, and human knowledge, because it *is* human, demands, amongst other things, a previously constructed atmosphere of knowledge within which to breathe. For the theoretical conceptualisation of reality requires not only an accumulation of sense-data, nor the conscious *processing* of such data, but a processing that takes place within an already socially-manufactured ideological framework. It is said that Wittgenstein once asked of a colleague how it could be that people thought that the Earth went around the sun, rather than seeing that it was the Earth that was revolving. The answer came back, as one would expect: ‘Because that is how it looks.’ ‘Yes,’ snapped the philosopher. ‘But what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the Earth was rotating?’¹⁰ There is nothing *prima facie intrinsic* to the movement of the sun across the sky that leads us to draw the conclusion of a geocentric universe: this was the predominant view in the pre-copernican west, but heliocentric depictions were hardly rare in the ancient world; it was only with the development of more sophisticated means of observing the movements of heavenly bodies did geocentricism become scientifically untenable (although ideological affinity for the notion would persist well beyond its refutation in scientific knowledge¹¹).

And it is in this that the non-coincidence of essence and appearance resides. For the apparent is only *merely* apparent not because it deludes (this it only does if it is taken not for what it is but *in place of* the ‘real’¹²) nor in virtue of enjoying a distinct ontological status, but because it affords a view of the partial, rather than of the total. Jon Elster once wrote that

[t]he appearance, that which appears, allows for two different antonyms. First, it may be contrasted with what is hidden, and accessible only by the mediation of thought. In this sense one may say that behind the appearance of a table is the atomic structure that forms its essence. [...] Secondly, one may focus on the local character of the appearance – since what appears always appears to a person occupying a particular standpoint and observing the phenomena from a particular perspective. Hence any given appearance may be contrasted with the global network of appearances that is not tied to any particular standpoint. As far as I understand Hegel’s theory of essence and appearance, the second interpretation is the correct one. It says that the essence is the totality of interrelated appearances, not something that is ‘behind’ them and of a different ontological order.¹³

Bridging this gap – between appearance and essence, between partial knowledge and global knowledge – is the task which Marx refers to as ‘science’. But this is not science in the narrow, positivist, popperian sense. A limited range of observations over a relatively short space of time would give us the ability to make highly

⁹ And that science advances through paradox is an idea prominent in Hegel, as well as one that Marx delights in in his exposition in *Capital*, as he seizes on each apparent paradox in his exposition as an excuse to expound theoretically deeper.

¹⁰ At least according to a character in Tom Stoppard’s *Jumpers* (London, 1972), p. 66.

¹¹ For if science can be said to advance through the quest to investigate paradox, and eliminate it, religious thinking, like all ‘vulgar thinking’, thrives on paradox’s existence. And neither is it the case that the persistence of scientifically incorrect thinking is ‘innocent’. Social consciousness is determined by social being, and in a class society class power too influences the development of human thought.

¹² In the field of political economy, the holding of appearance as essential is precisely what Marx identifies as ‘fetish’.

¹³ Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 124-5. Elster, correct on his fidelity to the second interpretation, mistakenly imputes the first to Marx.

accurate predictions as to the trajectory of the sun across the daytime sky (depending on the place of the observer and the time of the year) but would tell us nothing about whether the reason the sun crossed the sky at all was because it orbited the Earth or because the Earth itself span, or even whether the sun was transported out of sight from west to east after its daily transit on the back of a giant turtle. This is not 'science' in the sense that Marx has in mind.

Marx once referred to 'the power of abstraction' as his key scientific instrument.¹⁴ In the Postface to the Second German Edition of *Capital* volume 1 (just before his celebrated remark about Hegel's dialectic 'standing on its head') Marx noted that

[...] the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere *a priori* construction.¹⁵

In engagement with material reality – an engagement which necessarily begins at the level of appearances – one appropriates material in detail, analyses the forms of development, and traces out the inner connections of these forms. The objective in this work is, starting from the mass of appearances ('a chaotic conception of the whole') 'by means of further determination, [to] move analytically towards ever more simple concepts,¹⁶ from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until [...] arriv[ing] at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until [...] finally arriv[ing] at the [...] [object of investigation] again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.'¹⁷

In other words, once you look at an actually-existing concrete aspect of material reality, as a chaotic whole, as a mass of appearances, you see that its existence is premised on and conditioned by determining factors, which are in turn premised on and conditioned by others. As you strip away the successive layers of determinations – i.e. as you, literally, 'abstract' – you arrive at the 'simplest determinations', beyond which you cannot go. From here, the 'real' can now be reconstructed *in thought*, not now as empirical – apparential – 'chaos', but analytically, as a 'rich totality of many determinations and relations'; in short, you can see what it is that it is really composed of, and what makes it, in its 'dynamic existence', as it is.

If one stage of the method of scientific enquiry involves 'abstracting' to arrive at the elementary, it is worth reflecting on what 'to abstract' really means. Right after the comment from the *Grundrisse* just cited, Marx describes his method as one of 'rising from the abstract to the concrete'. The direction of movement indicated here is significant. 'Abstract' in this conception is not something 'up in the air', not an *a priori* and arbitrary construction, raised above reality, but something existing within the real: to be, not constructed, but *identified*, through the amassing of the empirical data provided by appearances and 'analys[ing] its different forms of development [...] [and] trac[ing] out their inner connection.' The real object under investigation may then be depicted as a theoretical object, by re-adding in more secondary determinations in a process of 'de-abstraction', of concretisation, rising from the analytically simple to complex totality, reconstructing the concrete in theory as 'the concentration of many determinations, [the] [...] unity of the diverse.'¹⁸ The real object is thus captured in thought, *as* theory: through the tool of science thus understood, the initial non-

¹⁴ *Capital* volume 1., p. 90.

¹⁵ *Capital* volume 1., p. 102. And, although this is often misunderstood, *Capital* is precisely a work of (logical) presentation.

¹⁶ The word Marx uses is *Begriff*, a Hegelian concept and difficult to translate. *Begriff*, conventionally 'concept' or 'idea', was used by Hegel to refer to the 'sublation' (*aufhebung*) of 'essence' and 'being', and is roughly what it is about something that makes it as it is (*Begriff* is also closely related to the verb *begreifen*, 'to grasp' in the sense of 'comprehend').

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 100.

¹⁸ *Grundrisse*, p. 101.

coincidence of real essence and manifest appearance is resolved, paradox (and hence the real object) explained, the unity of the diverse and the partial grasped.

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