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Fetishism and Modernity in Walter Benjamin. Text for launch ceremony of the book *City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. Fragments of Metropolis* by Vincenzo Mele

I do not think it is an overstatement to state that the publication of the book *City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. Fragments of Metropolis* by Vincenzo Mele is an achievement in the scope of Sociology and Critical Theory that must be weighted and appraised in its full dimension, not only because it focuses on two prominent philosophers and sociologists of the 20th century, but also because, by delving into their thought, it allows us to explore the intellectual and conceptual origins of the contemporary world in a way that helps to connect the epochs, overcoming the naive appearance of a total rupture or an absolute split. Indeed, as the author expresses it from the beginning of the book, paying homage to a large extent to the same authors mentioned in his analytical reflection, it is a question, through the study of two eminent works of making a prehistory of the so-called “post-modernity,” which allows us to understand our origins and to locate with greater precision the issues that overwhelm and concern us. The book, then, should not be understood as a simple erudite study of two authors, sociologists and philosophers, extremely relevant in the last century -which, in itself, would have its own merit- but a questioning of two theoretical conceptions of the past which, in their own way, immediately take us into actual problems and force us to reflect, in a more grounded and richer way, on their meaning and the ways of their possible confrontation and solution.

There are many topics and problems that are addressed throughout this important book. Each one encloses a complexity and a richness that cannot be summarized in a few pages, and that requires, in the best way, to take the challenge of its complete, detailed reading; of its reflection and critical feedback. Topics such as Simmel's critique of progress, his critique of scientism reduction of the theoretical dealing with reality and, therefore, his defense of the essay and its aesthetic force to create a conceptual unity of fragmented events of modern reality; his critique of dissolution of the whole individual in the abyssal strata of consumerism and the world of money; the figure of *blasé*, the jaded, and his connection with an overcoming of the mercantile ethics; etc. Likewise, in Benjamin, there is an infinity of stimulating and suggestive topics: his aesthetic conception of the critique of modernity, his conception of baroque *Trauerspiel*, symbol and allegory, construction of the city, construction of memory, figure of the *flaneur*, etc. All fundamental and relevant topics for 20th century and today thinking. But none, from our point of view, is as relevant and essential to understand the socio-political derivations of the contemporary domain and its ideological expressions as the one that encompasses the notion of *fetishism*, especially in Walter Benjamin, to which the author, Vincenzo Mele, rightly gives a singular relevance in considering central elements that are part of his questioning of metropolitan modernity. This notion enclosed in *nuce* and enunciated all the critical aspects that, in one way or another, the authors who question the course of modern world and its dominant phenomena underline as essential to understand and, if necessary, transform the reality that surrounds us.

With the word *fetishism* (from the Portuguese *feitiço*, spell)¹, Marx -who was the introducer of this term in the social-critical

¹ "A fetish is an action, a word or a thing used as an instrument to achieve a spell (*feitiço*), i.e., to provoke an updating of the supernatural in a concrete singular situation. It is an instrument like any other, but it is also magical: its effectiveness goes beyond the effectiveness recognized as natural by society. Its real presence is

vocabulary- threw in the face of modern society a questioning that still weighs on it like an uncomfortable burden from which it cannot fully free itself. Far from its historical self-projection as the civilization which, due to its eminently rational roots, had overcome religious, mystical, traditional and irrational vestiges of the preceding time, managing to “disenchant” (Weber) social reality, capitalist modernity, in its worship of mercantile logic, was thought of by Marx to be equal not to the dominant religious institutions in the European world of medieval times and its permanence in modern societies, but to the most archaic forms of social organization, characterized by the divinization of natural phenomena and their structuring around them. This aesthetic-ironic turn in Marxian terminology cannot be overlooked, since, supposedly, what is at issue in *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy* -the work where this term is introduced-, is about “purely economic” questions (which is, evidently, a false idea of this work).

From Marx’s point of view, capitalist society, which was raised on the material basis of mercantile society, integrating, preserving and surpassing it, was a society that carried as a formative cell an archaic principle of divinization of a certain particular object, which in that society acquired the status of metaphysical potentiality. In its dual quality, bearer of use value and value, commodity was the only object capable of ensuring, through objects exchange, social connection between private subjects who, by themselves, did not

thus necessarily double or ‘mystical’, at once profane and sacred, material and spiritual, earthly and heavenly. It is an object whose ordinary or natural role in social life is visited and absorbed by a miraculous or supernatural role (it is the seamstress’s pin turned into the witch’s sword). It is this structure of the objective presence of the fetish that Marx considers when he states the analogy between the fetish object and the commodity object. His description of the objective structure of the commodity reveals, in effect, that this is also a ‘mystical’ object of double effectiveness, that its role in social life moves on two different planes, the one ‘physical’, natural or ‘sensorial’ and the other ‘metaphysical’, supernatural or ‘suprasensorial,’” (Bolívar, 1986: 198), translated by Blanca Susana Barajas Fragoso.

have the capacity to interconnect their needs and capacities systems. For Marx, the epistemological-Kantian question (which Simmel will later formulate again, as Vincenzo Mele rightly points out) on the possibility of modern society, is answered through the image of mercantile fetish: if society is possible, it is only because it yields the socializing capacities of the subject to the mystical-mercantile object. This is who gathers and this who organizes; not the social subjects, who, to a large extent, always lag behind the commodity. Modern-mercantile society is fetishistic because it organizes itself, idolizing it, around this singular object with socializing capacity; it is *bewitched* by it; it depends on it to exist.²

With the fetishism's concept, Marx summarized, then, more than twenty years of critical theoretical work on ideological formations of modern power. *Fetishism* was the name with which the German theorist rounded off the concept of *ideology* that he had originally outlined in 1845, in *The German Ideology* (unpublished work, co-authored with Friedrich Engels), stressing that ideology could not be conceived merely as a "false perception of reality," but as a practical-inert construction (Sartre) of reality that, in fact, presented itself inverted or as the opposite of what it was or what it was supposed to be. Reality itself, not only thinking, was bewitched, inverted, disrupted, and for this very reason it was not enough to

² Since private producers have no direct communication among themselves and have broken the connection between their system of needs and their system of capacities, establishing a structural crisis within social reproduction, the only possible connection is that offered to them by mercantile objects, which, as a result, acquire "supernatural" characteristics that transform them into fetishes, capable of re-socializing the unlinked subjects. "Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other. [...] Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. [...] To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [dinglich] relations between persons and social relations between things", (Marx, 1982: 165-166).

turn to an epistemological critique, but it was necessary to practically modify the coordinates on which reality was founded.³

The story of abandonment of this central concept in the history of supposedly “Marxist” socialism, and the attempt to replace it with a precise and exact knowledge of the rigid “laws” of economic reality is well known (Kautsky’s case is an example)⁴. Positivism, scientism, economism, etc., took their toll on Marxism and stripped it of its most suggestive and radical concept. It was not until already in the 20th century, exactly 100 years ago, when, finally, with the Georg Lukács’ work, Marx’s critical thinking -in which economic critique was indissolubly linked to ideological critique- was recovered and vindicated in its philosophical and sociological radicalism. In order to understand Walter Benjamin’s participation on the topic of fetishism and underline Mele’s contribution to its conceptual clarification, it is necessary to synthesize, in a few lines,

³ This was something Marx had already stressed since the presentation of his (unfinished) critique of Hegel’s philosophy of right (1843). The “weapon of criticism” could not replace the “criticism of weapons,” although theory itself, taken up by the masses, was to become a material power in connection with revolutionary praxis. Cf. (Marx, 1982 :497).

⁴ In his debate with Bernstein, Kautsky affirmed that, contrary to what the social-democratic leader maintained, for whom Marx’s theory could not demonstrate its full scientificity in the terms demanded by the nineteenth-century academy (which had adopted the paradigm of natural sciences as the methodical referent for social sciences), historical materialism was an exact, necessary and deterministic science. “Marx and Engels’ great achievement is to have brought historical facts, more successfully than their predecessors, into the domain of necessary facts, thus raising history to the rank of science. And when they have done this, Bernstein comes in, claiming that the scientific progress of Marx and Engels has consisted in suppressing determinism in History”, (Karl Kautsky, 1966: 23), translated by Blanca Susana Barajas Fragoso. With this statement, Kautsky ignored the critical-dialectical sense of the joint work of Marx and Engels, for whom the scientificity of their project could only be affirmed in opposition to the hegemonic scientificity of the bourgeois mentality, of a causalist and determinist nature.

what Lukács' participation on this most central notion consists of. It will not take us long to do so.

We could summarize the central idea of Lukacsian proposal regarding commodity and capitalist formations in the following way: in the central article of *History and Class Consciousness*, entitled "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," Lukács argues that, in order to fully understand the way in which Marx describes and critically analyzes contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, it is necessary to follow the thread of the analysis that the author of *Capital* proposes in Chapter 1 of his great work, in particular, that which concludes in Section 4, called precisely "the fetishism of commodities." What is introduced in that section is not only the inverted ideological effect of directly human relations -as usually synthesized in the well-known formula: "relations among humans appear as relations among things and relations among things as really human relations"-, but that can happen because the basis of all mercantile exchange, commodity itself, is shaped by a dual reality, which in itself is contradictory: the use value-value opposition. Well, Lukács says that, so as to understand the true meaning of this opposition it is not enough to reduce it to an epistemic or logical contradiction of the commodity's components, but the basis of this opposition is the clash or transposition of two antagonistic social structures: one that corresponds, as Bolívar Echeverría would call it, to the social-natural form of use value, and one that concerns to the historically determined form of value and exchange. While the first form refers to the organizational community of subjects, where there is an integration of system of needs and social capacities that makes collective reproduction possible, the second is based on the absolute split between private owners that puts in crisis the social process of reproduction and, therefore, needs to parasitize the other form of community and reunify it under the logic of mercantile exchange, with the purpose of making possible the achievement of social reproduction. The mystical, ideological and fetishistic aspect of the mercantile appearance is sustained in a particular figure of the

reproduction of material wealth that takes the form of the break of organizational bonds of human community and its reintegration under the face of the market and its principle of object exchange.⁵ Overcoming this fetishized form of social existence would imply affirming against it the communitarian form of use value, thanks to which the mystical-fetishistic illusion created by the commodity would be overcome and subjective social relations would once again acquire their transparency, rationality, autonomy and social intelligibility. This is the essence of what Lukács proposes in the first section of his famous essay on the concept of fetishism.

What Walter Benjamin will do conceptually from this important historical intervention within Marxian theory (which in itself founds what will later be called “Western Marxism” or “critical Marxism”) is the most radical turn conceived up to that moment around the articulation of the critique of capitalist modernity and its ideological structuring. And this conceptual turn will be centered, precisely, on the notion of fetishism. The starting point of this transformation or conceptual turn, as we have called it, is found in the notion of use value, which in both Marx and Lukács serves as the material basis for constructing the critique of the ideological phenomena that accompany the mercantile fetish and its derivative forms in capitalist development. As Mele underlines it from the metaphor of the “camera obscura” in *The German Ideology*,⁶ where the inverted reality

⁵ Thus Lukács explains the impact of capitalist mercantile logic, with its “rationalizing” tendency, on the process of social production. This rationalization “[...] must declare war on the organic manufacture of whole products based on the *traditional amalgam of empirical experiences of work*: rationalisation is unthinkable without specialisation. The finished article ceases to be the object of the work-process. [...] The unity of a product as a *commodity* no longer coincides with its unity as a use-value...”, (Lukács, 1968: 88-89).

⁶ What Marx and Engels literally write in *The German Ideology* is the following: “Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*],

in modern social conscience is mentioned, it prevails in Marx the idea that there is a “non-inverted world,” or rather a world set on its feet, transparent, to which the communist society would have to give way when liberating humanity, by means of revolution, of its fetishized form. What Benjamin theoretically does before this materialist idea based on the use value-value opposition is to abandon the idea of the critic’s privileged access to the “true form” of social reality from the vantage point of use value, introducing, in opposition, the metaphor of the “magic lantern” to explain how the conscious and unconscious construction of the human world and its objective similar ones work at all times. Mele points this out clearly: “Where in the metaphor of the camera obscura the real world is mechanically inverted by ideological representation, the magic lantern of phantasmagoria inverts painted images that are themselves artistically produced fictions” (Mele, 2022: 296).

For Benjamin, the critic does not have, then, as Marx and Lukács proposed, a privileged access to a non-ideological or mythological point of view (that of use value, of objective reality) from which to base the totality of his critique. Phantasmagoria penetrates everything. Again Mele: “Benjamin, in other words, would conceptualize the concept of criticism as itself ‘phantasmagoric’: the critic does not have privileged access to objective reality that is ideologically turned upside down, but can only discern what he considers to be appearances, comparing them with other appearances. He tries to combat illusions with other illusions in turn. A form of rational demystification can no longer be the mere task of the critic” (Mele, 2022: 297). If this is so, Mele tells us, the task of the critic, in the conception introduced by Benjamin, can only be exercised from the distinction between two types of

and the being of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process”, (Marx and Engels, 1968: 42).

phantasmagoria: the “mystifying phantasmagoria” and the “critical phantasmagoria.”

Consequences of this conclusion are enormous. If in Benjamin the critique of the mercantile and fetishized form of capitalist society can no longer distinguish between an objective reality, based on use value, and an illusory or phantasmagoric reality, proper to the spectrality introduced by mercantile value, but everything tends to be absorbed by social phantasmas, this means that the possibility of overcoming or revolutionizing the capitalist form of modern sociality can only be carried out by introducing a specific type of revolutionary discourse and action that assumes the challenge of opposing to the phantasmagoric idea another radically different phantasmagoric idea. Reality has to be re-symbolized.

Since it is impossible, in the scope of this essay, to give a complete explanation of what Mele’s work on Benjamin proposes, it will be necessary to summarize in a somewhat violent way the proposal of the author as a theoretical solution to the topic that has been chosen in relation to this thinker. Mele achieves, with great erudition and fully aware, to link two moments of Benjamin’s thinking in order to give an account of his drifts regarding fetishism and critique of modern capitalist society. These two moments are those that epistemologically outline, on the one hand, *The Origin of Tragic Drama or German Trauerspiel*, and the ambitious and unfinished project of *The Passages of Paris*. In the former, two notions are developed that will be recovered later, according to what Mele demonstrates so well, in Benjamin’s notes and reflections in the process of writing the latter work. Concepts are those of *allegory* and *symbol*. While, with help of the former, Benjamin explains a type of representation that outlines the form of a “mortified nature,” a ruinous nature, with the latter he advances in the characterization of a vivified object that acquires fluidity and movement, that becomes spiritualized. Allegory, thus, to explain it in simple words, would represent the “reified spirit,” stopped, already dead, while symbol would be the possibility of thinking the “spiritualized object” or

deified, as a living substance, a fluid in constant process of change and modification.⁷

Connection of the two notions introduced with the theoretical understanding of the modern capitalist world could be found in the following: the mercantile fetish is the *modern allegory*: sociality reified and reduced to its most prosaic forms, devalued of its symbolizing and formative potentiality. Before this destruction and reduction of reality to a purely dead object of exchange, the critic, as we said, cannot offer an objective and real point of view, but only a new phantasmagoric idea that re-constructs that reality in the complexity that has been expropriated from it (and that can only be fully overcome by an aesthetic-mythical language, not subjected to the “logical rules” of mercantile abstraction). Faced with the allegorical death of modern reality, it is necessary to re-symbolize reality, to re-construct it from a narrative that inaugurates a new relation between subjects and among them and the world of objects. Mele does not go that far, but we could underline that, in Benjamin’s project, what is at stake, in the end, is a re-mythologization of the world. A re-mythologization that opposes the unconscious ideological myth of capitalist modernity, the *modern allegory* of the mercantile fetish, and that can consciously construct an aesthetic-philosophical meta-discourse that sketches the oppositions and traces the coordinates of a historical-political struggle. This is what Benjamin does in his famous *Theses on History*. There he elaborates, in Nietzsche’s style, a modern mythology, which, of course, no longer lives as traditional mythology of the unconscious repetition of its practices and postulates, but asserts itself as a political stance in struggle against the absolute hegemony of the mercantile form, which not only reduces reality to the domain of the dead, the practical-inert and the instrumental, but which, for that very reason, advances like a whirlwind that destroys and drags down every possibility of affirmative, plural and rich construction of human experience.

⁷ “The ‘fluid and changing’ nature is the matter of the symbol, while in the allegory time finds expression in the mortified nature,” (Mele, 2022: 322).

Benjamin conceptualizes this battle of political-mythological dimensions as the confrontation between the Messiah and the Antichrist.⁸

It would still be necessary to explain the difference between Benjamin's proposal of the critical and revolutionary use of redemptive mythology (outside its traditionalist roots) to confront the mythical-fetishist ideology of modern capitalist society, and the factious, authoritarian and destructive way in which fascism constructs its own mythology in collusion with the most oppressive forces of domination system. But that is beyond the ambitions of this essay, whose sole purpose was to celebrate the emergence of Vincenzo Mele's work in times of hardship for critical thinking in sociology and contemporary philosophy.

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⁸ "Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious", (Benjamin, 2006: 391).

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