CAPITALISM AND ITS CONTENTMENTS:

A NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

The interpretation of ideology as falsehood is in tension with the materialist foundations of Marxism, a tension downplayed by both Marx and the critical theorists. Because ideology is not a spontaneous creation of consciousness but a reflection of real material conditions, it can only be false to the degree that changes in material conditions outpace changes in ideas. Ideology is an effect, not a cause, of changing conditions. However, as false consciousness, ideology supposedly obscures from workers their true plight and power. It is, then, both an effect of economic change and an obstacle to it, making ideology critique paradoxical: critique seeks to promote the very material conditions that must already exist for critical consciousness to be possible.

Marx resolves this paradox by tracing the possibility of ideology critique to the workers’ unique material conditions, which give rise to an advanced form of consciousness. However, since ideology critique blames ideology for the failed arrival of revolutionary consciousness, it fails to explain the mismatch of ideology to class: why do workers continue to hold an ideology that is the product of another class’s material conditions?

Marx must now claim that the workers’ material conditions present themselves in the false light of commodity fetishism, in which division of labor produces the illusion that the market independently determines the value of commodities. Although workers experience growing alienation and immiseration, commodity fetishism obscures the source of that suffering in the exploitation of labor and obscures the source of commodity value in workers’ own labor. However, this still does not solve the principal problem. Ideology does deny exploitation alone, but alienation and immiseration, as well. It even insists on a positive correlation between capitalism, wealth, and happiness.

So, the interpretation of ideology as falsehood can only be preserved by extending the theory of commodity fetishism from the ideological to the material level. As the critical theorists condescendingly claim: false beliefs must be grounded in false desires and satisfactions. If we deny our exploitation, alienation, and immiseration, it is because we are mistaken about what we really want. We only think we are happy with capitalism.

This solution ignores an explanation of ideology’s power that is more in keeping with Marx’s commitment to materialism: namely, that capitalist ideology is in many respects perfectly true; capitalism gives us what we really want. If class-consciousness has failed to appear, it’s not because ideology is false, but because ideology has not yet *become* false. Ideology critique has been too ideological, idealistically seeking causes in beliefs, in perceived conditions, desires, and satisfactions rather than in real, material ones.

Marx implies just this when he says that in commodity fetishism, our relations of production don’t appear falsely but “as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things.” Commodities really do determine the social relations of workers, and workers really are objects exchanged on the market. Labor is only potentially, not really, social; workers only potentially experience alienation since they do not view the commodity as their labor; and their control of the value of commodities is only a possibility, not an actuality. It is not hyperbole when Marx says capitalism’s principal effect is to dispel illusions, so that “man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” If ideology’s power is found in its contingent truth, then the critique of ideology must stress that contingency: it need not and cannot continue to be true.

To begin the critique of ideology from its contingent truth is also to restore its materialist foundation in the positive features of capitalism. Capitalism’s revolutionary productive capacity, its inexhaustible ability to satisfy real needs, is the material basis of the possibility of real human happiness. So we must pose our critical questions differently. Not: how has capitalism deceived us? But: how has capitalism made us happy? What are its real forms of contentment and why must they eventually fail? These questions require something Marx cannot give us: a truly materialist psychology, rooted not in the Hegelian spirit’s alienated desire or the Freudian ego’s Platonic nostalgia, but in a theory of desire as positive material activity. And where better to find such a psychology than in Freud’s anti-Platonic, anti-Hegelian predecessor and rival, Nietzsche?

Nietzsche’s psychology is grounded in his theory of the will to power, a tendency not toward the accumulation of power, but toward the intensification of the feeling of power in struggles against resistance. In contrast to Freud’s view that drives aim at pleasure experienced as the neutralization of instinctual stimulation, Nietzschean drives aim at the “happiness of high tension.” While the Freudian subject aims for satisfaction, the Nietzschean subject is paradoxically frustrated by satisfaction, finding happiness in continual desire sustained by resistance and tension, even seeking frustration and resistance as a way of intensifying desire and the pleasure that accompanies its satisfaction.

Consequently, for Nietzsche, desire is fundamentally a desire to desire. Its true aim is not satisfaction as an end but as a process, the activity of overcoming obstacles to satisfaction, the active and continually renewed movement from desire to satisfaction that intensifies both desire and pleasure. Neither desire nor satisfaction are pleasurable in themselves: satisfaction produces pleasure only if it is delayed and desire intensified, while desire is pleasurable only if we can reliably anticipate its eventual satisfaction.

Capitalism’s success depends on this delicate balance of desire and satisfaction. Its extraordinary efficiency in production creates an ever-greater surplus in desires, an always increasing plenitude of novel forms of pleasure and satisfaction. In order to remain profitable, new commodities must be mass-produced in numbers sufficient to expand their market, reducing their cost until they become accessible to all. So capitalism manufactures satisfactions just as efficiently as it manufactures desires: it produces increasingly accessiblenew pleasures, making yesterday’s impossible luxuries into today’s affordable necessities. In doing so, it satisfies the first condition of Nietzschean happiness: desire is experienced as pleasure because it includes the reliable expectation of eventual satisfaction. Desire is experienced not as privation but as anticipation.

However, this efficiency in production can only be maintained if markets are exploited and expanded in keeping with production. The efficient production of satisfactions must be combined with a continual creation of new demands; the endless redirection of desire from old needs to new, unattain ones. And while this stick and carrot strategy of manufactured needs might seem like manipulation, a betrayed promise of happiness, it is, on the contrary, the very basis of happiness. For it allows capitalism to satisfy the second condition of Nietzschean happiness: satisfaction is experienced as pleasure only if it is delayed, only if desire is intensified. By manufacturing new desires that continually reintroduce unattained satisfaction, capitalism protects happiness from the neutralizing, tiring effect of all too easy plenitude, intensifying desires prior to satisfying them and thereby heightening their pleasures. Capitalism satisfies while still giving desire what it really ultimately wants: continued, intensified desire rather than mere satisfaction.

There is, however, a danger in capitalism’s method of intensifying desire. According to Nietzsche, happiness depends upon the feeling of power experienced in actively overcoming resistances to desire. However, here the primary obstacle to desire is not a positive resistance, an occasion for active overcoming, but the negative obstacle of economic inaccessibility: tomorrow’s must-have commodities, the latest manufactured needs, are still too scarce and expensive to easily obtain. Instead of enhancing pleasure by providing a challenge to actively overcome, manufactured needs can produce a feeling of powerlessness and dependency: what is there to do but passively wait for the market bring our newest desires within our reach?

However, this threat posed to happiness is diffused precisely by capitalism’s effects of exploitation and immiseration, rather than despite them. Instead of aggravating our sense of powerlessness, capitalism’s tendency toward falling wages, insecure employment, and excessive, more demanding labor inadvertently protects happiness, for it provides a constant form of active struggle, a feeling of resistance and its overcoming, that allows for periodic satisfaction to be interpreted as independent activity and accomplishment. The more labor is exploited, the more convinced we become that our ability to obtain our desires is the fruit of initiative, not just the inevitable outcome of the falling prices of overproduced goods in exhausted markets. The ideological disdain in capitalist societies for leisure is not a lie: overwork is inseparable from and a principal condition of our form of happiness.

So, ideology is true, its pleasures real. There is no need to obscure workers’ real material conditions, since capitalism does not produce happiness *despite* exploitation and immiseration but *through* them—through their strategic use as delayed, intensified forms of renewable desire and satisfaction. Rather than decry capitalism on epistemic grounds for its false beliefs, on psychological grounds for its false pleasures, or on ethical grounds for its injustice, we must instead critique its ability to sustain its forms of contentment. Whether the pleasures of capitalism are pure is a question for moralists. Why they must fail is the question for Marxists.

Why then can’t capitalist happiness be maintained indefinitely? Simply put: because it produces pleasures too efficiently, narrowing the gap between demand and supply, desire and pleasure, eliminating resistance to, and the intensification of, satisfaction. At its limit, this tendency achieves the simultaneous production of desire and satisfaction with the invention of needs that can be instantly gratified. This limit point has been approximated in the rise of virtual commodities such as digital media and entertainment, commodities whose production and content is immediately controlled by the consumer, and with the virtual market of the internet, where commodities can be purchased and distributed instantaneously.

The virtual commodity was anticipated in Heidegger’s “On the Question of Technology” as the transformation of beings into *Bestanden* or “standing-reserves,” in contrast to objects as *Gegenstanden*, beings that stand against the subject rather than pure resources, beings that stand at the service of the subject. The traditional commodity as concrete, material object is an object of consumption that cannot be entirely consumed, preserving its independence from the subject as an obstacle to its desire.

In contrast, as pure, dematerialized resource, the virtual commodity is an object of perfect consumption, allowing for the complete overcoming of alienation, the very source of desire. Because its content is entirely and immediately determined by the consumer, in the virtual commodity subject and object become one. Against Hegel and Marx’s idealist psychologies, Nietzsche understands that alienation is not unhappiness but the very foundation of happiness: pleasure depends on the objects that stand against it; it is born in the movement between desire and satisfaction, in the playful repetition of alienation and reconciliation that provokes and intensifies the feelings of desire and pleasure.

The traditional commodity is an object of resistance and source of desire, an object as *Gegenstand* rather than standing-reserve or resource in three principal ways. First, it produces desire by delaying satisfaction. Its form of production introduces obstacles between one pleasure and the next that revive and intensify desire. The traditional commodity necessarily introduces a degree of scarcity in its production; there are a finite number of goods, not equally available to everyone. This element of inaccessibility demands varying degrees of effort, expertise, and skill on the part of consumers; new pleasures must be explored, discovered, sampled, tracked down, and captured. The thrill of the hunt is inseparable from the pleasures of capitalist commodity consumption. Traditional commodities introduce delays in satisfaction that not only heighten the pleasures of satisfaction but create an active, intensified desire that is itself part of the commodity’s mode of satisfaction.

In contrast, virtual commodities eliminate both inaccessibility and scarcity. Digital commodities are produced and distributed instantly in direct proportion to demand, and then consumed instantaneously upon discovery, preventing any delay in satisfaction or inaccessibility in production and distribution. This “on demand” efficiency in the production of satisfactions entirely disrupts the traditional market’s process of intensifying pleasures. The lingering pleasures of the window shopper, the browser, and the haggler disappear in a virtual market that uses analyses of previous purchases to predict the next purchase before the last one has even been completed. The spark of discovery, the delight of an unforeseen, unexpected pleasure, is lost. There is no thrill of the chase in a virtual market that guarantees that even the most rare and obscure objects of desire can be instantly tracked down and immediately purchased.

The second way the traditional commodity resists the subject, producing desire as well as satisfaction, is by providing finite, exhaustible forms of consumption. Because traditional commodities have a fixed content, their pleasures inevitably wear thin, grow tiresome and overfamiliar, introducing satiety, boredom, listlessness and, eventually, curiosity: the desire for novel pleasures. They introduce temporary frustration precisely through satisfaction, introducing a gap before the discovery of the next desire and its eventual fulfillment.

Virtual commodities, on the other hand, have no fixed content and so their content is never exhausted. Computers, smart phones, tablets, even radio and television are resources rather than objects, inexhaustible vehicles for the acquisition of virtual commodities whose content can be completely consumed and immediately refreshed. Virtual commodities do not grow tiresome; they subvert rather than cure boredom; they stifle rather than indulge curiosity; they eliminate gaps between old satisfaction and new desires, preventing the desire for and production of new desires.

The final way traditional commodities resist the subject’s desire is by providing imperfect satisfactions. Because their fixed content is mass-produced for a general consumer, they cannot be perfectly tailored to the preexisting demands of each individual. Every commodity alienates in some way, qualitatively or quantitatively falling short of the perfect fit.

This inevitable mismatch of desire and satisfaction is not just a frustration of desire but also its education, an opportunity for the subject to develop more sophisticated forms of desire, more complicated tastes and pleasures. The traditional commodity’s fixed content simultaneously satisfies desire in some aspects while challenging it in others. Its frustrations cannot be deleted or refreshed. To enjoy its satisfactions, the consumer must learn to live with its challenges and often learns to love its difficult pleasures more than its easy ones: the commodity as resistance generates new, more sophisticated desires.

A book once abandoned is casually picked up again to become an obsession. An initially hated song on an old record becomes the eventual favorite, generating an interest in an entirely undiscovered genre of music. A movie begins dully, but stuck in the theatre, we stick with it, discovering its virtues in the story’s fuller development. The traditional commodity multiplies desires; it ensures that the production of desire outpaces the production of satisfaction. It generates more desires than it silences, while producing more intense forms of satisfaction: the greater pleasure of the educated palate, of overcoming of the commodity’s resistance, of cultivating rare tastes, of mastering the challenge of difficult pleasures.

The virtual commodity is, in contrast, powerless against the subject. It cannot defy preexisting demands; it cannot teach new tastes or introduce new pleasures. For it is tailor-made to give us only what we have previously wanted, for as long as it is wanted, and then to disappear. Because the virtual commodity’s content is immediately determined by the preexisting desires, it is always completely consumed. It completely reconciles subject and object, mirroring every mood and whim, satisfying desire without regenerating or multiplying it.

The virtual commodity represents the inevitable movement of capitalism from efficiency in the production and satisfaction of desires to efficiency in their prevention, from the manufacture of needs to the manufacture of subjects beyond either need and desire. At its technological limit, the desire for and consumption of virtual commodities become simultaneous: desire is satisfied before the subject is compelled to consciously experience any lack of the desired object. With the virtualization of capitalism, desire too becomes virtual, existing only in a neutralized, anaesthetized, and abstract form. Needs can be preemptively identified and treated without the inconvenience and economic inefficiency of affective states of curiosity, discovery, craving, longing, delight or joy—without, that is, the inefficiency of happiness.

At its limit, capitalism’s forms of contentment assume an entirely negative form: the desire to prevent pain by preventing desire and, consequently, by preventing pleasure. Consequently, capitalism as the production of surplus pleasure fails for the same reason that capitalism as the production of surplus value fails: from its success, from an overproduction of value that leads to a crisis in its consumption. Happiness ends when we become too happy to continuing desiring happiness. The truth of ideology is that capitalism satisfies too well.