

The Making of Abstraction. Some Hypotheses on Money, Language, and Modern Literature

La fábrica de la abstracción. Algunas hipótesis sobre el dinero, el lenguaje y la literatura moderna

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Abstract

The question I have tried to answer is whether there is such a thing as linguistic alienation and what are its consequences for Marxist literary studies and the understanding of so-called “superstructure” in general. Relevant assumptions about this topic were elaborated above all in the 1960s and 1970s by Lefebvre, Rossi-Landi, Baudrillard, and Latouche, through the tabulation of parallelism between Marx’s theory of value and Saussure’s theory of the sign. In my opinion, all these hypotheses failed to highlight the specificity of Marxian interpretation of money, which is a very distinct form of semiotics, because (as Finelli and Arthur, among others, have shown) it owes a lot to Hegelian logic.

I, therefore, try to prove that, by forcing certain categories of semiotics and the philosophy of language to interpret the critique of Marx’s political economy, money turns out to be not a sign, but a code: paraphrasing Lacan, one could say that capital is configured as a language. It is not, however, a neutral language, but a linguistic praxis capable of concealing a material situation through abstractions. If this is true, we don’t really need to ask how a matter (the structure) acts on a series of semantic and ideological chains (the superstructure), but to what extent capital itself, considered as a *text*, works as a formal pattern (using Marx’s words: a *formelle Bestimmung*) for the organization of all the matter on which it extends its abstracting domain. The “structural causality” relied on by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* is thus the result of the dialectical nexus between mechanical and expressive causalities.

Key words: theory of value; Marxism; semiotics; philosophy of language; linguistics; economics; commodity fetishism; literary theory; comparative literature; political philosophy.

Resumen

La pregunta que he tratado de responder es si existe tal cosa como la alienación lingüística y cuáles son sus consecuencias para los estudios literarios marxistas y en la comprensión de la llamada “superestructura” en general. Suposiciones relevantes sobre este tema fueron elaboradas, sobre todo, en los años sesenta y setenta por Lefebvre, Rossi-Landi, Baudrillard y Latouche, a través de la tabulación de un paralelismo entre la teoría del valor de Marx y la teoría del signo de Saussure. En mi opinión, todas estas hipótesis no lograron comprender la especificidad de la interpretación marxista del dinero, que es una forma muy distinta de semiótica, porque (como Finelli y Arthur, entre otros, han demostrado) debe mucho a la lógica hegeliana.

Por lo tanto, intento demostrar que, poniendo ciertas categorías de semiótica y filosofía del lenguaje a interpretar la crítica de la economía política de Marx, el dinero resulta no un signo sino un código: parafraseando a Lacan, se podría decir que el capital se configura como un lenguaje. No es, sin embargo, un lenguaje neutro, sino una praxis lingüística capaz de ocultar una situación material a través de abstracciones. Si esto es exacto, no necesitamos preguntarnos cómo una materia (la estructura) actúe sobre una serie de cadenas semánticas e ideológicas (la superestructura), sino en qué medida el capital mismo, considerado como un texto, funcione como un modelo formal (usando las palabras de Marx: una *formelle bestimmung*) para la organización de toda la materia sobre la que se extiende su dominio de abstracción. La “causalidad estructural” en la que se basa Jameson en *El inconsciente político* es, por lo tanto, el resultado del nexo dialéctico entre las causalidades mecánicas y expresivas.

Palabras clave: teoría del valor; marxismo; semiótica; filosofía del lenguaje; lingüística; ciencias económicas; fetichismo de la mercancía; teoría literaria; literatura comparada; filosofía política.

Introduction

In his famous introduction to *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson (2006) questioned the possible ways in which the capitalist mode of production affects literary texts. What kinds of facts must the literary critic seek to call himself a Marxist? Taking up the theory expounded by Althusser - Balibar (1970), Jameson distinguishes between mechanical, expressive, and structural causalities. By mechanical causality (a notion that Althusser traces back to Descartes) Jameson means the ability of the social and economic context to influence literary facts from the outside: what he also calls the “billiard-ball causality” (Jameson, 2006, p. 10). For example, it is indisputable the direct link between the publishing crisis of the late nineteenth century and the evolution in the internal structure of the novels of that period. For Althusser, expressive causality dates to Leibniz and serves as the basis for the Hegelian philosophy of the spirit, too. It is the tendency to identify, hidden under the variegated congeries of historical facts in each period, a rule or “master narrative” (Jameson, 2006, p. 13) which acts as an allegorical key for the interpretation of the whole. The real innovation introduced by Marx, according to Althusser, is instead the concept of structural causality: by “structure”, that is, we must not understand the strictly economic mode of production, but the very set of relations between the various levels, each to a certain extent autonomous, of a single, complex system. In this context, where each sphere (juridical, religious, artistic, etc.) retains a state of semi-autonomy, the economy has a privileged but not a deterministic role. The structure is neither a preponderant element that acts on the other, subordinate levels of the system, nor an internal essence that expresses itself as a determined, but hidden content within each level. On the contrary, as Althusser - Balibar (1970, p. 189) put it, it is an “absent cause”, because its entire existence only “consists in its effects”.

While mechanical causality was soon devalued by the more advanced Marxist approaches (Jameson, 2006, pp. 9-10), the author’s true polemic target is the idea that the relations between the economic basis and the so-called “superstructural” spheres can be read in terms of expressive mirroring. This is the underlying pattern of many attempts, even very different from each other, to conceptualize historical periodization: putting together in a single page Taine, Riegl, Spengler, Goldmann, Foucault, Deleuze-Guattari, Lotman, Baudrillard, and, of course, Hegel. Jameson (2006, p. 11) tags these operations as historicist reductionism. But a few pages later the author expresses even ferocious disapproval towards a particular version of the expressive causality, i.e., the concept of



homology, especially when this serves to validate the image of a precise mirroring between the sphere of material production and that of intellectual elaboration. Jameson (2006), comments harshly:

One cannot without intellectual dishonesty assimilate the “production” of texts (or in Althusser’s version of this homology, the “production” of new and more scientific concepts) to the production of goods by factory Workers: writing and thinking are not alienated labor in that sense, and it is surely fatuous for intellectuals to seek to glamorize their tasks—which can, for the most part, be subsumed under the rubric of the elaboration, reproduction, or critique of ideology—by assimilating them to real work on the assembly line and to the experience of the resistance of matter in genuine manual labor. (p. 30)

And further on:

The assertion of homologies is at fault here at least in so far as it encourages the most comfortable solutions (the production of language is “the same” as the production of goods), and forestalls the laborious—but surely alone productive—detour of a theory of language through the mode of production as a whole, or, in Althusser’s language, through structure, as an ultimate cause only visible in its effects or structural elements, of which linguistic practice is one (2006, p. 30-31).

Jameson is making here a very radical critique of a series of philosophical operations elaborated above all in the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to find something similar to alienation not only in the sphere of economics but also in language, through the tabulation of parallelism between Marx’s theory of value and Saussure’s theory of the sign (for a general overview on the debate, see D’Urso, 2015). Lefebvre (1966, pp. 336 ff.) was the first to analyze the commodity as a sign, comparing its exchange value to the “signifier” (as an object susceptible to being exchanged) and its use-value to the “meaning” (as an object available to satisfy a need). His pupil Baudrillard (1976) moved in a similar direction, but in his theory of simulacra he ends up mixing brilliant intuitions with a gloomy apocalyptic enthusiasm marked by an idea of abstraction as a mere deceptive semblance. Useful remarks are also found in Latouche (1973), which however places the parallelism between economics and linguistics in terms of a simple metaphorical correspondence. Considering this hypothetical parallelism outside of overall treatment of the mode of production says Jameson implicitly, legitimizes the all too convenient idea (and, it can be said, very trendy today) that intellectuals can exhaust their task by dealing only with linguistic issues.

Among those thinkers, the only one Jameson (2006, p. 29n) refers explicitly to, however, is Ferruccio Rossi Landi, whose work is, yes, vitiated by the reference to the homological paradigm, but is nevertheless “rich and suggestive”. What, in the thought of Rossi Landi (a scholar quite forgotten today), struck Jameson? Starting from an analogy between linguistic production and the production of goods by means of goods theorized by Sraffa (1960), Rossi Landi (1968) proposes to consider the economy as a branch of semiotics. Although his attempt to derive a theory of the sign from the theory of value is unsuccessful (his homology between signs and working tools seems rather an analogy, moreover a not very convincing one), worthy of reading are the pages where he accuses Saussure of having made with signs the same mistake that the marginalists do with commodities, i.e. to have built a linguistic theory addressing only the aspect of their differential combination, leaving out the moment of production. Rossi Landi’s great merit is having identified a decisive gap in the linguistic thought of his time, which we still carry with us today: the concept of labor is completely missing in all our philosophies of language. In my opinion, this is the reason why Jameson likes him: no “theory of language through the mode of production as a whole” (Jameson, 2006, p. 31) is possible without it.

The aim of my research is to try to take the first steps in the direction Jameson hoped for: how can we frame the problem of linguistic production without running the risk of fetishizing it? And how would a suitable conceptualization of this problem affect Marxist literary studies?

Methodology

To do this, I will try to analyze the similarities and differences between Grice's theory of meaning, the Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole*, and Marx's theory of value. It will result that, considered as a semiotic model, Marx's thought is much richer, because, being based on the Hegelian dialectic, it is capable of including the problem of historicity on its horizon.

Rossi-Landi and the other philosophers who have dealt with the relationship between the theory of value and theory of sign have been partially misled by a simple observation: while we may possess a commodity, linguistic codes are instead, at least apparently, the patrimony of all. How does something similar to "Linguistic Capital" or linguistic alienation exist if words, unlike commodities, cannot be pocketed? The truth is that, under its appearance as a material object, money is also a sign. Far from signifying an action carried out by the owner, the verb "to possess" indicates a juridical situation.

It is Marx himself who legitimizes this way of seeing things. Introducing the concept of property law, by which two people "recognize each other as owners of private property", he states the following:

This juridical relation, which thus expresses itself in a contract, whether such contract is part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two wills and is but the reflex of the real economic relation between the two. It is this economic relation that determines the subject matter comprised in each such juridical act. (MECW, p. 75)

In other words, no economic relationship could exist if it were not reflected in a juridical relationship that legitimizes it. It doesn't matter whether this juridical relationship is legally developed in the form of an explicit contract. It always virtually guarantees every act of exchange because ownership would be unimaginable without some institution safeguarding the undisturbed security of possession. On closer inspection, this implicit contract, which liberal thinkers theorized in the philosophy of natural law, works exactly like grammar: it doesn't matter whether it is legally developed as a set of rules to be explained in a handbook; it will anyway guarantee that every linguistic exchange ends up successfully. Linguists love to tell a joke to explain the difference between a language and a dialect: a language is nothing more than a dialect with an army and a navy. Dialects have as strict rules and as a rich lexicon as many official languages, but, unlike the latter, they have little or no recognition by the institutions. For any linguistic code to work, there is no need for any explicit grammar. If we look at the meaning of *langue* in Saussurian linguistics, grammar is nothing more than a bundle of implicit virtual potentialities.

If in several places of *Capital* Marx rejects the possibility for money to be considered a pure and simple sign, this is because the notion of the sign contains in his eyes a nuance of arbitrariness. And yet, every time he tries to get rid of it by putting it out the door, it keeps coming back through the window. This happens for example in the following passage:

The fact that money can, in certain functions, be replaced by mere symbols of itself, gave rise to that other mistaken notion, that it is itself a mere symbol. Nevertheless, under this error lurked a presentiment that the money-form of an object is not an inseparable part of that object but is simply the form under which certain social relations manifest themselves. In this sense, every commodity is a symbol, since, in so far as it is valued, it is only the material envelope of the human labour spent upon it. (MECW, p. 101)



It should be noted that the translation here is wrong because Marx doesn't use *Symbolen* ("symbols"), but *Zeichen*, that is "signs". Here the Trier philosopher is implicitly admitting that the very definition of value (as generic human labor incorporated in commodities) basically describes a semiotic fact. This happens because the commodity doesn't literally contain this work, but is rather *expressing* it: put it otherwise, it bears the signs of it. If this were not the case, the value would remain a completely unattainable mystical entity and the very existence of the critique of political economy would be forever compromised. If, on the other hand, the latter is a discipline born to interpret, starting from the form of use of the commodity itself (it's being linen, coat, or tea), how much human labor is needed to produce it, then *Capital* is a treatise on the semiotics of commodities.

However, this is a very particular type of semiotics because it contains an implicit critique of the arbitrariness of signs. The fact that human language signs are arbitrary, or conventional, doesn't mean that they are not necessary: only, to discover the origin of their necessity one must descend from the mental domain of *langue* to the practical and social one of *parole*. *Parole* is what day by day legitimizes every meaning, continuously renegotiating it.

To discuss this problem, we can take into account the famous example of Grice (1957), who made a pioneering distinction between two different types of meaning. The first, which Grice defines as a "natural" meaning, indicates a necessary link between two signs ("those spots mean measles"; p. 377); the second, which is defined instead as "unnatural", indicates a link between two signs established by a communicative intention: "Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the 'bus is full.'" (p. 377). In the first case, the connection of meaning resides by nature in the two referents (spots and measles), and the sentence that puts them in relation does nothing but reflect on the semantic level of an objective situation of interdependence: if the spots appear, then it is measles. In the second case, on the contrary, the semantic link between the bell and the bus being full is the result of a subjective agreement: there is nothing natural in the fact that one event "means" the other; if the bell rings, then *let's interpret* that the bus is full. Nonetheless, what Grice doesn't seem to take into consideration is that the link of significance between "those spots" and "measles" isn't actually necessary, but entirely internal to the definition that the secular experience of doctors, crystallizing in medical scientific studies, first, and then in dictionaries, has attributed to the second term: its naturalness is, in short, an eminently *social* fact (so much so that new medical research could potentially call it into question). To cut it short, Grice seems not to contemplate the particular type of illocutionary acts that Kripke (1999) calls "initial baptism": their function is to associate a name with a referent for the very first time. In the sentence "I will call this disease *measles*", thus, a miracle seems to occur intentionality producing natural meaning. The presumed "naturalness" of the natural meaning is nothing more than crystallized intentionality, now become customary. In other words, Grice presents as split and alternative two aspects of meaning which rather work as a dialectical polarity of all sentences.

In a very similar way use-value and exchange-value appear as two ineliminable dialectical moments of the nature of commodity: "As use values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities, but as exchange values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use value" (MECW, p. 48) At a closer look, therefore, the concept of "natural" meaning is the result of a fetishistic inversion: Grice should rather talk about something similar to a *naturalization of meaning*. This conventionalizing vector is implicitly present in all utterances and realizes what Jakobson (1960) called the "metalingual" function of communication:

Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the CODE: it performs a METALINGUAL (i.e., glossing) function. “I don’t follow you-what do you mean?” asks the addressee, or in Shakespearean diction, “What is’t thou sayst?” (p. 356).

While Jakobson argues that we only use this function in certain types of messages, I claim that it is presupposed and posited in every very act of our communication: every time we communicate among ourselves, in fact, we implicitly affirm that what we say has a meaning. By doing so, we may tacitly ratify a grammar, reinforcing its progressive crystallization, or we may put it in question with an innovation.

At the opposite dialectical pole, there is then the production of unnatural meaning: a linguistic act capable of establishing an association between a message and a pragmatic intention, that is, to continue with the comparison, to exploit its use-value. This is a transcendental category, too, because it cannot be suppressed by any utterance. Every message somehow expresses an intention to practically affect reality: even the headwords of a dictionary, which might seem purely informative, are actually confirming or denying an infinite multitude of worldviews, ideologies, prejudices, etc., as well as, of course, a certain linguistic *status quo*. Austin (1962, pp. 2-11) is therefore wrong to argue that only a specific kind of utterances are illocutionary acts: in the sense that I have come to outline, all of them are.

Just as every commodity possesses a double nature, both perceivable and supersensible, thus, in the same way, every linguistic act always produces a double result. On the one hand, as an act of *parole*, it produces a pragmatic effect on the interlocutor, who will be asked to respond to a communicative input; on the other hand, insofar as it pertains to *langue*, it will constitute a confirmation or denial of a communicative habit inscribed within the code. In short, to paraphrase Kripke’s expression, we could say that every act of *parole* must always imply a form of metalinguistic *Eucharist*: according to a logic analogous to Hegelian dialectics, only if we use the word “table” it will continue to belong to the code of English as a living language. In other words, the big flaw in the distinctions between *langue* and *parole*, natural and non-natural meaning, is that they are artificial, unable to account for the dialectical link that always intimately binds diachrony and synchrony. The strength of the dialectical model adopted by Marx in his *Capital*, on the other hand, consists precisely in the possibility of interpreting these two dimensions as mutually founding each other in the very core of the production process.

This is what Finelli (2005) called the “circle of presupposition-posit”. It is appropriate to present a long, significant quote:

The first circle -the synchronic one- is the circle [...] which from the surface of simple circulation (M-D-M), and from its appearances of free exchange between men and goods through money and prices, descends with the vector of real abstraction in the context of production and its structural links of asymmetry and inequality, that is, where capital is actually produced, to then return, through the multiplication of capital in many capitals, their competition and the secondary distribution of surplus-value in other classes of income, from the founding level of values to the phenomenal level of prices. In a descent and an ascent, that is, in production, the starting premise, in which the transformation of values into prices –that is to say the passage from a world structured in a quantity of work to a world expressed in a quantity of money– constitutes the founding core of the fetish effect intrinsic to the production of capital: a structural and objective effect, which, as I have already said, projects the asymmetrical relations between classes onto the screen of the market, deforming them into the individual silhouettes of the free subjects of buying and selling. Effect of fetishism, to understand which, here too we must refer to Hegel’s *Science of Logic* - this time to the second book, to the book of Essence, where, as is well known, it is a question of the appearance of the surface forms of



reality as semblances, by virtue of a “reflection” (Reflexion and not *Überlegung*), which is not the mental one of an external subject, it is not reflection as a psychological form of thinking, but is the reflection and deformation of the essence in itself objective of reality.

But the synchronic circle of capital and its logic of dissimulation between the level of the essence and the level of appearance could not exist without crossing the diachrony of history, which is also however curved according to the need for totalization in a circularity of presupposition and of production of the presupposition, whereby, as Marx writes several times in the *Grundrisse*, capital produces its own presuppositions, in the sense that it rewrites and re-signifies according to its own logic, everything that is preconstituted for its historical birth and diffusion. Starting with wage labor, subsumed first in a formal way and then in a substantial and real way to the capital, up to the re-identification of various apparently premodern types of work, which capital does not fail to update according to its own needs today. (Author’s translation)

We must therefore agree with Rossi Landi when he affirms the centrality of the concept of labor in order to understand the problem of language in Marxist terms: while the Saussurian *parole* (as well as, to give another example, the Chomskian concept of “execution”) indicates the individual and private use of a crystallized reserve of verbal resources, what we have tried to define as “metalinguistic Eucharist” is instead the fruit of a collective, trans individual process that is always in progress, just as happens to value and capital in Marx’s description. This entails several severe consequences both in linguistics and in the understanding of Marxian critique of political economy.

Considered from this dialectical and semiotic point of view, in fact, the sphere of exchange-value is nothing more than the metalinguistic coté that every act of buying implies: “exchanging” a commodity for money doesn’t really mean the physical, materialistic act of passing on an object from one side of a counter to the other, but the semiotic act of inscribing in money, as a code of equivalences of the generalized exchange, another, infinitesimal fluctuation in the prices of all other commodities.

As Žižek (2012) noted, it is indeed necessary to

reformulate the standard Marxist topic of “reification” and “commodity fetishism”, insofar as the latter still relies on a notion of the fetish as a solid object whose stable presence obfuscates its social mediation. Paradoxically, fetishism reaches its acme precisely when the fetish itself is “dematerialized”, turned into a fluid “immaterial” virtual entity; money fetishism will culminate with the passage to its electronic form when the last traces of its materiality will disappear [...]. And it is only at this stage, when money becomes a purely virtual point of reference, that it finally assumes the form of an indestructible spectral presence: I owe you \$1000, and no matter how many material notes I burn, I still owe you \$1000, the debt is inscribed somewhere in virtual digital space. (p. 246)

As the computerization of the banking system easily shows (and it shows it precisely in the Hegelo-Marxian sense of *Erscheinung*), therefore, there is no substantial difference between money as a banknote for the single grocery trade around the corner and Money as an enormous catalog of stock indices: the second is the transcription on a telematic medium of the ever-changing dictionary that the concrete sphere of exchanges keeps to presuppose and posit at the same time. The events that led to the 2008 crisis have shown how money can now be used as a mere wording in the computer system of a bank account. But what is a mere wording, if not precisely a *linguistic object*? The financialization of economy isn’t, therefore, as it might appear, distorting the material nature of money, but realizing what it’s always been. Money is *in its very essence* not a material object, but a code: the shaky language of economy.

To possess an exchange-value, every commodity must be reflected in another commodity-equivalent. The same is true for signs as well. In a good English dictionary,

the definitions of the words “linen” and “cloth” refer to each other. In the same way, in Marx’s theory of value, linen and cloth (or “coat”) as commodities can mutually act as a form of relative value or as equivalent value to each other. Money is then defined as a commodity that functions as a “general equivalent” for “20 yards of linen”, “1 coat or”, “10 lb tea”, “40 lb coffee”, “1 quarter of corn”, “2 ounces of gold”, etc. (MECW, p. 75). All throughout his exposition of the subject, Marx describes money, on the one hand, as the manifestation of the “endless series of equations” (the so-called “expanded expression of relative value”; MECW, pp. 104-105). On the other, price represents its socially valid form. Arthur (2004), who insisted even more than Finelli on what he calls a “homology” between the theory of value and Hegel’s logic, puts it in these terms:

Money as a ‘piece’ of itself pretends to be something that has value (which may be claimed as gold, just to confuse things) rather than being the necessary form of value. [...] In price, money acts as if it were just a numeraire, and commodities act as if they were inherently valuable. But in truth-value achieves conceptual determinacy only through price.

Precisely because it serves to define the value of all other commodities, money seems to have no place within this dictionary. And, in fact, Marx claims that, for this to happen, “we should be obliged to equate it to itself as its own equivalent”, thus resulting in a sort of tautological definition. However, this is curious: it’s been precisely Marx the first to describe capitalism as a mode of production capable to produce money out of money itself. Capital actually operates as a kind of living tautology. If we look in the Oxford dictionary for something that works for the English language as money does with goods, what we find is this:

Mean. verb. /mi:n/ have as meaning (Not used in the progressive tenses). (Of a word) to have something as a meaning in the same or another language

Put otherwise, without the very concept of signification, no dictionary could make words’ definitions refer to each other. According to the same logic, money works as a set of rules whose function is to establish whether any good can enter the market: in assuming the phenomenal form of price, it recognizes the grammatical nature of commodity as a sign. In other words, money works in the semiotic field of economy as *grammaticalization itself in its pure form*. So, owning large amounts of money means gaining more power to decide what is grammatical and what instead isn’t: and this is because every act of buying and selling (of any commodity, including labor power) implies a metalinguistic Eucharist, which is to say, the confirmation or denial of a market trend.

The power of money consists of transforming a “relation between two wills” into a legal relationship: that is to say, it is a power of transcoding. The deed of sale takes place simultaneously on two layers of the signification of the same and only money code. The first layer expresses the juridical universe of property relations between people and goods, and corresponds, therefore, to the concrete linguistic sphere of use-value as the economy *parole*; the second represents the financial level of equivalences between commodities, relating, therefore, to the abstract, metalinguistic sphere of exchange-value as the economy *langue*.

Results

Reinterpreted in this framework, the concept of surplus value takes on a new meaning, placing itself between the legal and financial spheres. The wage itself being a deed of sale we can read surplus-value as a transcription of two different values on these two levels of an only money code: that same labor power, insofar as it presupposes and posits an equivalence with the rest of the labor power crystallized in all commodities (abstract labor),



will be worth an n quantity on the financial level, while on the juridical level, insofar as it presupposes and posits an equivalence with the labor performed (living labor), it will be worth an $n - x$ quantity. In short, the capitalist takes for himself a certain x share of wealth. Once entered on the juridical level, this x is placed in a relationship of equivalence with the n share, although not reflecting any performance of living labor. Surplus-value is therefore configured as the introduction, in the legal sphere, of a pure logic of domination, of an asymmetry due to which x and n , namely the property resulting from exploitation and the one resulting directly from labor, are under all appearances indiscernible.

Discussion

But how is it possible to act differently on the two levels of a single linguistic code? What does it mean? But how is it possible to act differently on the two levels of a single linguistic code? What does it mean? From the point of view of the classical categories of semiotics, this statement makes no sense. So let's take a step back.

Eco (1976, pp. 6 ff.) suggestively defined the latter as a “theory of lies”, that is, a tool capable of studying everything that, as it can be taken as a sign, can also be used to lie. Eco's own writings are a testimony of how semiotics is an omnivorous discipline, almost virtuosic in its ability to submit any aspect of life to the scrutiny of interpretation. However, the paradox is that, precisely because it treats all the signs as previously given entities, dropped from the sky, shall we say, studying their internal functioning, but not their origin, results by definition in an idealistic practice. The author of the book entitled *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Eco, 1995) knew very well that a perfect language can exist only if it stands outside time, and therefore by excluding any relationship with History: in this sense, Eco and semiotics treat all languages as perfect. Precisely because, in his fetishism of form, his theory knows no difference in principle between a true and a false statement, and therefore between historical languages and imaginary ones, it happens that the lie represents the impossible object in front of which his bulimia must stop: one can make the semiotics of all statements, that is, of everything that can be used to lie, but from a semiotic point of view the lie itself is indefinable. To undermine this idealistic character, therefore, bringing this fundamental aporia to its extreme consequences, we must ask ourselves: what would a semiotics of falsehood look like? On closer inspection, Marx himself provided a useful model for dealing with the problem, when he decided to deduce his theory of value following the example of Hegelian logic.

It is obvious that to recognize falsehood one must refer to the criterion of factual verification, but the search for the resemblance between a statement and the reality to which it refers should not be interpreted, as it happens for example in the modal logic, only as a comparison between two states of things or between “possible worlds”. When we question the veracity of the statement “John's dog is wounded”, we are not just wondering if there is a real John's dog of whom we can say “is wounded”; more in-depth, we are wondering whether any reality has *worked* to make this statement true. Hegel's famous phrase according to which “the real is rational” means precisely that we must define an entity as “real” only if we can understand the logic that determined its production, that is to say, the logical-ontological nexus that legitimizes its manifestation. Looking for vestiges of a wound on the body of John's dog, therefore, means discovering the clues of action that reality may have performed on it.

But what if we look in the capitalist's pocket (or bank account) for clues of the labor he may have done to earn the wealth he possesses? It happens that the money we find manifests itself in its nature of a resounding lie. It is simply false that the wage fully repays the worker of the labor-power he has provided. This excess of labor which Marx

calls surplus value, precisely because it does not reflect any work done by the capitalist who takes it, constitutes the irrational core of the capitalist economy precisely because it is false: if money is generic human labor crystallized in a body of gold, silver, paper or computer, then the capital owned by those who have not worked is basically something like *counterfeit* money.

Finelli (2014) is therefore right when, in supporting the reasons of a Marxism of abstraction against that of contradiction, affirms the following:

The structural contradiction highlighted by the circle of the presupposition-positing is in fact - evidently not that of traditional Marxism between the *good* of the productive forces and the *evil* of the relations of production - but that of the link between *essence* and *appearance*, according to which the inequalities and asymmetries of class, the domination of one over the other, in the sphere of production, appears, on the surface of society, disguised in the opposite, as relations between equal subjects, free from any prior social placement and inequality. A connection between opposite levels of reality, therefore, which has nothing to do with the classical contradiction, rightly forbidden by Aristotelian logic, consisting in the claim to preach, in the unity of the same time, the same predicate, both positive and negative. Because here the connection of opposites is played out - *through the emptying from inside that the abstract operates on the concrete with the reduction of it to a surface film* - between a level of hidden reality and a level of appearing, in which the appearance conceals and dissembles the essence. (p. 333; my translation).

Briefly, money is neither an object nor a sign of arbitrary value. On the contrary, it is a sign whose deceptive meaning consists precisely of disguising itself as a material object and, what is more, of *acting as if it actually were such*. In its form of incorporated surplus-value and, therefore, capital, it is a superstructural, metalinguistic universality (it is an Abstraction), and nonetheless, it is Real, because it structures and ratifies all relationships of power. It hides, under the guise of a relationship of absolute equality between commodities, the existence of a minor commodity, less equal than the others, that is, labor power.

The paradox, however, is that the State itself, through its laws, guarantees the validity of this counterfeit money, that is to say, makes it impossible to distinguish it from the money earned through work: shortly, the “dialectic of dissimulation” Finelli wishes for is already all contained in Marxian theory of value, if we consider it semiotics of institutionalized falsehood. If the deceptive abstraction of surplus value becomes real in the exploitation of labour power, it is because it works like all lies: if someone tells us them it is to make us act as if they were true; the more we act as if they were true, the more we legitimize the appearance that they are. Even the semiotics of falsehood is therefore reproduced according to the logic of the circle of the presupposition-positing, ending up coordinating the constitution of an autonomized “social objectivity” (as Adorno, 2019, would put it). This objectivity, which is independent from the will of individual agents, is the consequence of the fetishism of commodities in terms of totalization: a sociology (and, we may add, a literary criticism) worthy of this name should put it at the core of its interest, abandoning the methodological individualism which is its major shortcoming.

It is not the behavior of the agents that determines the law of value, but the law of value that is imposed through the economic agents. The very structure of capitalist production imposes on social analysis a complete abandonment of any form of methodological individualism and its replacement by an analysis that disregards the sociality understood from the agents. (Redolfi Riva, 2009, p. 36; my translation)

To fully understand the implications of this idea, we must go back to the lesson of Backhaus, Adorno’s pupil. In his *Dialektik der Wertform*, the German philosopher has



shown that nothing like a premonetary theory of value can exist. Contrary to what Engels believed, and with him the whole tradition of Soviet Marxism, value can only exist in the phenomenal form of money: this is the real lesson from the first chapters of *Capital*. This fact involves a substantial split:

The commodity, understood as a synol of value of use-value, refers to the contradiction between private and concrete labor, on the one hand, and social and abstract labor, on the other. While the first side of these oppositional pairs refers to something individual, something that is present in the conscious consideration of the producer, the second side refers to something over-individual, which takes place in circulation and which objectively imposes itself on economic agents as an average, which acts after and independently from the private provision of labor. The opposition between use-value and value that characterizes the commodity is therefore the opposition between the process of private labor delivery and the social sanction of it (Redolfi Riva, 2009, pp. 38-39; my translation).

If what we have come to say so far is correct, this “social sanction” that money carries out by incorporating abstract labor into its spectral objectivity is actually a semiotic phenomenon: paraphrasing Lacan, we can say that capital is configured as a language. Unless this language, in order to produce its institutionalized falsehood, is structurally divided, not within the subject which uses it, but in the referents (commodity and money) of which it has become a symbol.

We can finally come back to the question we asked ourselves at the beginning: is there anything like linguistic capital? The answer is yes, provided that it is understood as the reflection on the level of language of a contradiction inherent in reality. It is therefore an idle exercise to determine whether and which linguistic practices produce alienation outside of any discourse on the context of enunciation from which they arose.

Conclusions

In an essay entitled *Cybernetics and Ghosts. Notes on fiction as a combinatorial process*, with a mixture of euphoria and paradoxical spirit, Italo Calvino imagines a future when there will be “writing machines” capable of replacing writers in the flesh, by composing novels and poems in their place. Interestingly, Calvino describes this machine, with which he basically identifies himself, as an almost opportunistic figure, as a device that chooses a poetic orientation based only on the logic of trend; which means outside of any claim to authenticity. In a grotesque and paradoxical way, this is confirmed by the following passage, a masterpiece of irony, where Calvino fundamentally seems dismissing Marxist literary criticism:

To gratify critics who look for similarities [*omologie*] between things literary and things historical, sociological, or economic, the machine could correlate its own changes of style to the variations in certain statistical indices of production, or income, or military expenditure, or the distribution of decision-making powers. That indeed will be the literature that corresponds perfectly to a theoretical hypothesis: it will, at last, be *the* literature. (Calvino, 1987, pos. 17.0 in the epub edition.)

The term “homology” was the central theoretical tool in Goldman (1975), which had been translated from French to Italian in the same year when Calvino gave these lectures. What Calvino provides us with these last sentences is nothing less than a cybernetic interpretation of the function of literary theory. If, in fact, this machine can operate on the basis of a theoretical hypothesis on the relations between literary texts and sociological, economic and historical facts, then we can also say the opposite: any theoretical hypothesis on literature is nothing more than a machine, a hardware to produce classicism. After all, if one were to conceive an extension to the literary field of Benjamin’s considerations

on art in the age of its mechanical reproduction (see Benjamin, 2008), one could perhaps start from this very point, reading the typically modern proliferation of theories, manifests and poetics as a huge effort aimed at the gradual mechanization of the writing practice. Calvino insists on the necessary split that derives from the act of approaching the page to write we always find ourselves doubled “into an ‘I’ who is writing and an ‘I’ who is written” (Calvino, 1987, pos. 19.4 in the epub edition), in the act of writing and in writing as a reflection of the authorial image. After all, what the machine embodies is the autonomous “social objectivity” of the concept of literature itself (this is typically modern, too). On closer inspection, the split that we are talking about is very much the one between private labor and social labor, as far as writing is concerned. To what extent does the concretization of the social labor conceal, disguise, false, presuppose and posit the practice of the private one? If there is a process of valorization in the artistic praxis, too (this is what the modern critics’ job is almost always about), can we find traces of this teleology in artistic forms?

Paraphrasing Marx, we could say for instance that modern literature is “a huge collection of abstractions”: concepts such as Mystery, the Absolute, the Infinite, and Nothingness, become the protagonists of a new imagination, inaugurated by the season of Romanticism. Concepts of this kind were unthinkable in classical aesthetics, which was based on the imitation of nature. Why do they gain so much success? And why precisely in modernity? The answer may lie, in my opinion, in the fact that the market, as we have described it so far with the analogy of the dictionary, is nothing more than a text. The question then arises: what if something similar to capitalist *textuality* existed? What if, that is, the question is not how a matter (the structure) acts on a series of semantic and ideological chains (the superstructure), but to what extent does capital itself function as a *formal* model for the organization of all the matter on which it extends its dominion? What if the capital is the “formal determination” (*formelle Bestimmung*; see Finelli, 2015, pp. 23 ff.), the basic teleological cell of a social reproduction based on the reified objectification of abstractions? If this were the case, then the first task of the Marxist critic would be to ask whether literary modernity (and, by a fractal logic, many of its parts: texts themselves) does not constitute a complex structural allegory of capitalism as a whole. In this context, expressive causality would cease to appear as a form of analogical reductionism (as Jameson, 2006, seems to put it), because it would find in the split between private and social labor, that is, in the abstraction that “becomes practically true in the very core of production” (Finelli, 2014, pp. 113-125; my translation), its mechanical origin.

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