

Digital Fetishism and the Mystification of Social Relations in Algorithmic Capitalism

Insights from Marxist Theory

Jia Sun¹

¹ School of Marxism, Beijing University of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China

¹Corresponding author. Email: 2024500125@buct.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution and contemporary relevance of Marx's theory of fetishism, moving from its origins in religious fetishism through commodity fetishism, and extending its analytical framework to the phenomenon of digital fetishism within contemporary algorithmic capitalism. By revisiting Marx's critical insights into how social relations become mystified as natural properties of objects, the paper identifies structural parallels between historical forms of fetishism and the present-day mystification processes mediated by digital technologies. Drawing upon recent theoretical advancements by Japanese Marxist scholars—particularly Masahide Ishizuka's distinction between "positive fetishism" and "negative fetishism" (idolatry)—the paper develops a nuanced critique of digital fetishism, emphasizing how algorithmic and data-driven systems conceal underlying labor, interests, and power relations. It argues that contemporary digital platforms systematically transform human subjectivity into quantifiable and controllable data entities, reinforcing exploitation through invisibilized labor. Ultimately, the paper advocates a "denaturalizing" critique that exposes digital technologies as social and historical constructions rather than autonomous forces, calling for institutional innovations and democratic control to reclaim human agency from the ideological veil of digital fetishism.

Keywords: *Fetishism, Marxism, Commodity fetishism, Digital fetishism.*

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM RELIGIOUS FETISHISM TO COMMODITY FETISHISM - MARX'S THEORY OF FETISHISM

This chapter traces the historical and theoretical evolution of the concept of fetishism, from its early roots in religious studies through its significant theoretical transformation by Karl Marx into the concept of commodity fetishism. By examining how early scholars identified and interpreted fetishistic practices across various cultures, the analysis highlights the conceptual foundations that enabled Marx to repurpose this idea as a powerful critique of capitalist social relations. Understanding this transformation provides a necessary framework for exploring contemporary forms of fetishism, particularly in relation to digital capitalism.

1.1 The Intellectual History of the Concept of Fetishism

The concept of fetishism originally emerged in the field of early religious studies to describe the phenomenon of certain social groups' sacred worship of material objects. In primitive social formations, material carriers such as idols, amulets, and totems transcended their inherent physical properties and were endowed with mysterious supernatural powers, thereby becoming the central objects of spiritual worship.

The scholarly development of this concept can be traced back to the pioneering contributions of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment scholar Charles de Brosses. As a prominent member of the Enlightenment intellectual community, de Brosses employed the then-cutting-edge methods of comparative religious studies to conduct a systematic examination of primitive

belief systems in Africa and the Americas. The historical origins of this research tradition can be traced back to the mid-fifteenth century: during their trading activities along the West African coast, Portuguese merchants discovered local tribes' worship of certain sacred natural objects, which they collectively termed "Feitiço" (fetisso), meaning amulet in Portuguese. De Brosses first employed this term in his 1756 publication *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes*[1], and subsequently developed a theoretical construction of the concept of fetishism in his seminal work *Du culte des dieux fétiches*[2].

In de Brosses' analysis, fetishism was defined as a primitive belief structure with cross-cultural universality: diverse populations across geographical and ethnic boundaries were seen to attribute supernatural powers to specific animate or inanimate objects, thereby designating them as fetishes. The essential feature of this belief system, according to de Brosses, lies in a mechanism of projection—the process by which worshippers externalize their internal hopes, fears, or desires onto material objects, which are consequently imbued with subjective agency and authoritative power. De Brosses' theoretical account of fetishism offered a crucial conceptual resource for Karl Marx's later formulation of *Fetischismus*, which reappropriated the term and structure of fetishistic misrecognition as a critical tool for analyzing the mystified social relations of capitalist society.

De Brosses's theoretical conceptualization of the fetishism phenomenon provided crucial intellectual resources for Marx's later development of his concept of "Fetischismus", which ultimately transformed into a theoretical tool for critiquing capitalist social relations. As anthropologists Rosalind C. Morris and Daniel H. Leonard have noted, the emergence and application of this term was "indispensable to thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lacan, Baudrillard, and Derrida." [3]

1.2 Marx's Theory of Fetishism

Marx's employment of the concept of fetishism was not a mere lexical borrowing, but rather an original theoretical transformation. He astutely observed that within capitalist market society there exists a phenomenon structurally analogous to religious fetishism, namely commodity fetishism. The significance of this theoretical discovery lies in its revelation of a more concealed yet equally fundamental mechanism of cognitive inversion in modern society.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx provides a precise analysis of the origins of this phenomenon: "The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the natural properties of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them." [4] This assertion reveals the epistemological roots of commodity fetishism: people misconstrue value determinations, which essentially belong to the category of social relations, as natural properties inherent in the objects themselves.

Why does this misrecognition occur? In *Capital*, Marx further elucidates the operational mechanism of commodity fetishism: "The mystery of the commodity form consists simply in the fact that the commodity form reflects back to men the social characteristics of their own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labor as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers." [5] The key to understanding this "mystery" lies in comprehending the structural characteristics of a society based on the division of labor: although people create commodities through their labor, in a highly specialized modern society, individual producers must establish social connections through commodity exchange to enter into broader networks of social relations. This mode of social interaction mediated by objects produces a structural consequence: direct social relations between people become concealed behind exchange relations between objects. What originally constitutes the social power of human cooperation appears, on the surface, to be transformed into a mysterious power possessed by commodities themselves. This cognitive "displacement" endows commodities with an authority that transcends their physical properties, generating a systematic cognitive misalignment in people's consciousness. This misrecognition, in turn, further mystifies "things", leading to various fetishistic phenomena.

1.3 The Structural Mechanism and Social Effects of Commodity Fetishism

The mystification process of commodity fetishism exhibits significant structural homologies

with religious phenomena. Just as the objectified products of human spiritual activity in the religious sphere—deities, doctrines, ritual systems—ultimately acquire autonomy beyond their creators and regulate human life as unquestionable authorities, in commodity fetishism, the reified products of human labor (commodities, money, capital) similarly manifest as objectified forces independent of human subjective will, possessing seemingly natural and irresistible characteristics of domination that permeate all aspects of social reproduction.

Through systematic deconstruction of commodity fetishism's operational mechanisms, Marx constructed a critical theoretical paradigm with trans-historical universality: social structures or institutional arrangements created by humans under specific historical conditions, once acquiring relative autonomy, transform into alien forces external to their creators, imposing structural domination and constraints in return. The explanatory power of this theoretical insight extends far beyond the analysis of commodity relations, constituting an important component of historical materialist critical theory. Based on this theoretical model, Marx and his theoretical successors identified multiple manifestations of fetishistic phenomena within modern social structures. Money fetishism sacralizes abstract exchange symbols, making wealth accumulation an end in itself detached from concrete use-value; capital fetishism endows capital with the magical ability of "self-valorization", thereby obscuring its inherent exploitative social relations. In specific historical contexts, state fetishism or bureaucratic fetishism can likewise be observed, transforming political institutions that should serve public welfare into absolute authorities beyond democratic social oversight.

These differentiated forms of fetishism collectively reveal a theoretical proposition: fetishism is not unique to capitalist society but represents a structural problem that may persist across different stages of human social development. They reflect a fundamental alienation in the relationship between humans and their social creations—the inversion of subject-object relations, whereby humans lose conscious control over their own social products. Following this theoretical logic, we have sufficient grounds to infer that just as pre-modern societies gave rise to religious fetishism and industrial capitalism generated commodity fetishism, contemporary digital society

may similarly produce new forms of fetishism with period-specific characteristics.

The generative mechanism of this "digital fetishism" likely stems from the systematic mystification of algorithmic systems, data-driven decision-making mechanisms, and artificial intelligence technologies—misrecognizing these essentially human-designed and operated technical apparatuses as objective entities transcending human reason with unquestionable authority. As Andrea Miconi observes: "the isolation of the data from their social milieu, in the likes of raw material, self-explaining statistical patterns, synthetic simulations, or needs imposed by the big other. A final note about this tendency toward the reification of the data, which is eclipsing the memory of the social entanglement of any production process." [6] This observation reveals the core characteristic of digital fetishism: the de-socialization and de-historicization of technical rationality, presenting algorithmic logic as natural law transcending social construction. The distinctiveness of digital fetishism lies in its "algorithmic black box" character—the invisibility of technical operational mechanisms to users reinforces the mystique of technical authority. Unlike traditional commodity fetishism, digital fetishism not only obscures relations of production but also intervenes in processes of subject formation through mechanisms such as personalized recommendations and predictive analytics, thereby achieving more refined forms of social control.

However, to construct a precise theoretical analytical framework for contemporary fetishistic phenomena, reliance solely on Marx's classical analytical tools proves insufficient. We need to further draw upon recent developments in contemporary Marxist theory, particularly the important conceptual distinction between "fetishism" and "idolatry" proposed by the Japanese Marxist school, to more accurately grasp the specific operational logic and structural characteristics of fetishistic phenomena in the digital age.

2. THE STRUCTURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FETISHISM CRITIQUE: FROM THE NATURALIZATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS TO THE RESTORATION OF HUMAN PRAXIS

This chapter aims to reveal the fundamental structure and theoretical implications of Marx's critique of fetishism through analyzing the theoretical distinction between "positive fetishism" and "negative fetishism" (i.e., idolatry) proposed by Japanese Marxist scholar Masahide Ishizuka. The core value of this conceptual distinction lies in its requirement that we not view various fetishistic phenomena in commodity society as unchangeable "natural laws" or inherent "natural attributes" of objects, but rather restore them to specific social relations generated by human historical practice. It is precisely within this "denaturalizing" critical perspective that the revolutionary potential of Marx's theory of fetishism becomes fully manifest, providing an important methodological foundation for analyzing contemporary "digital fetishism" phenomena.

2.1 Masahide Ishizuka 's Typology of Fetishism: Theoretical Framework and Documentary Basis

Through examination of Marx's relevant texts, Ishizuka Masahide discovered that in Marx's intellectual development, there actually exist two different forms of fetishistic phenomena: one is "positive fetishism", the other is "negative fetishism"[7], namely idolatry. "Positive fetishism" refers to situations where humans, when facing deities or idols of their own creation, still retain the possibility of destroying, negating, or even escaping their domination. In this relational structure, the subject-object relationship between creator and created has not been completely inverted, and human subjects still maintain a certain degree of control over their creations. Conversely, "negative fetishism" means that once idols acquire independent authoritative status, they transform into dominating forces imposed from outside, compelling people to passively submit to their rule.

This theoretical distinction is closely related to Marx's work in his early "Fetishism Notebooks" (1842). During April to May 1842, Marx, having just obtained his doctorate, engaged in religious and atheist studies, completing seven important excerpt

notebooks now known in academia as the "Bonn Notebooks" (Bonner Hefte). The "Fetishism Notebooks" constitute one of the seven volumes of the "Bonn Notebooks," now included in Volume 1 of Section IV of the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA² IV/1), published in Berlin in 1976.[8] In these notebooks, Marx systematically excerpted from the work *Du culte des dieux fétiches* by the 18th-century French Enlightenment thinker Charles de Brosses, which laid an important foundation for his later theoretical treatment of the concept of fetishism.

According to Ishizuka's documentary analysis, de Brosses explicitly defined three basic characteristics of fetishism: (1) believers select or create their own gods from natural objects, namely "fetishistic objects"; (2) believers directly worship the gods they have created themselves; (3) once the worshipped object fails to meet their expectations, believers may destroy or abandon the object. This series of structural characteristics had a significant impact on Marx's intellectual development.

2.2 Early Marx's Analysis of "Positive Fetishism" and Its Theoretical Turn

De Brosses' theoretical influence on Marx can be clearly evidenced in his early works. In "The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*," Marx explicitly states: "Fetishism is so far from raising man above his sensuous desires that, on the contrary, it is 'the religion of sensuous desire' (Religion der sinnlich Begierde). Fantasy (Phantasie) arising from desire deceives the fetish-worshipper (Fetischdiener) into believing that an 'inanimate object' will give up its natural character in order to comply with his desires (Geltgier). Hence the crude desire of the fetish-worshipper smashes the fetish when it ceases to be its most obedient servant." [9] This exposition almost completely embodies the third characteristic defined by de Brosses, namely that idols may be destroyed if they fail to satisfy believers' desires.

Within this theoretical framework, humans, driven by their own desires, endow objects with "will" and "capacities" that transcend their physical limits, thereby becoming slaves to their own desires in return. However, the crucial point is that this behavioral logic of "destroying idols" is identifiable in early Marx's excerpts and textual usage. For example, Marx excerpted verbatim accounts of priests during droughts in ancient Egypt who "threatened sacred animals at night, even secretly killing them": "When Egypt experienced drought,

producing much suffering and disease, priests would take sacred animals to a secret place at night, first issuing severe threats to them; if disasters still did not cease, they would quietly end their lives." [10] While this fetishism is primitive, it precisely exemplifies humans' capacity to negate deities under certain extreme conditions. This becomes a typical paradigm of "positive fetishism": humans have not yet completely submitted to the dominating structures brought about by their own creations.

However, as Ishizuka points out, this "positivity" gradually recedes in Marx's analysis of fetishism after 1844, giving way to the critical structure of "negative fetishism" represented by Capital. In the latter, commodities have already become irresistible idols, and human social relations acquire "the appearance of things" in commodity form, thus shifting the direction of critique from emotional rebellion against particular idols to systematic revelation of structural concealment. With the comprehensive unfolding of commodity form in capitalist society, believers' possibility of "destroying or abandoning idols" gradually disappears. Therefore, although Marx continues to use the term "fetishism," what he reveals in Capital is essentially no longer "positive fetishism" but "negative fetishism," that is, idolatry.

2.3 The Critique of "Negative Fetishism" in Capital and Its "Denaturalizing" Function

This theoretical turn receives more systematic theoretical expression in Capital. Marx explicitly states that people's definite social relations "assume in their eyes the fantastic form of a relation between things," meaning that the "reified" presentation of social relations conceals their essential social nature. He further emphasizes: "The fetishism is inseparable from commodity production" [11]. This assertion indicates that the occurrence of commodity fetishism is not an accidental event but an ideological structure necessarily produced after the universalization of commodity exchange.

Japanese scholar Tabata Minoru's analysis of this issue is particularly incisive. He points out that "the root of these behaviors lies in the external nature of the relationship between the two. The form of negation adopted to negate an external relationship is, naturally, also external." [12] In other words, it is precisely because no substantial internal unity has formed between idols and human desires that acts of negation can occur. Believers'

attacks on idols essentially constitute a rejection of an externalized relationship. In commodity fetishism, however, the divinity of things is no longer externally attached but becomes the manifestation of social structure itself. The relationship between humans and gods transforms into the relationship between humans and their own social relations; humans no longer face an object that "can be destroyed" but rather a system that "must be acknowledged."

It is in this sense that the "naturalization mechanism" of fetishism reaches its extreme: social structures acquire a seemingly unshakeable material appearance, while their historical genesis is concealed as "natural law." This precisely marks the key transition from "positive fetishism" to "negative idolatry." The significance of this theoretical developmental trajectory lies in its revelation of the fundamental goal of Marx's critique of fetishism: not simply to negate or destroy certain specific idols, but through systematic analysis of the naturalization process of social relations, to restore seemingly objective "laws of things" to historical social relations that can be changed through human practice. This "denaturalizing" critical perspective provides important theoretical tools and methodological guidance for understanding and analyzing various new forms of fetishism in contemporary society.

3. THE CONTEMPORARY EVOLUTION OF FETISHISM CRITIQUE: FROM THE POLITICAL SPHERE TO DIGITAL CAPITALISM

Scalar variables and physical constants should be italicized, and a bold (non-italics) font should be used for vectors and matrices. Do not italicize subscripts unless they are variables. Equations should be either display (with a number in parentheses) or inline. Use the built-in Equation Editor or MathType to insert complex equations.

3.1 Contest-Fetishism: Ideological Misrecognition in the Political Sphere

The epistemological structure revealed by Marx's critique of fetishism is not confined to specific phenomena within the economic domain, but possesses broader theoretical explanatory power. Contemporary political theorist Colin Bird, in his paper "How Not to Be a Realist: The Case of Contest-Fetishism", creatively extends Marx's

methodological framework to the realm of political analysis, proposing the concept of "contest-fetishism"[13] that provides a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the operational mechanisms of contemporary political ideology.

Bird's central argument posits that contemporary political realist theory exhibits a systematic form of ideological misrecognition: the ontologization of agonistic political forms developed under specific historical conditions as the universal essence of political activity. This theoretical tendency asserts that the essence of politics consists in competitive conflict, maintaining that in value-pluralistic modern societies, politics necessarily manifests as strategic games and power struggles between different groups. However, Bird astutely observes that this ostensibly "realist" theoretical position precisely falls into what Marx criticized as the "objectification mistake"—the misidentification of historical, contingent institutional arrangements as transhistorical necessary laws.

The structure of this theoretical error exhibits isomorphism with commodity fetishism. Just as Marx revealed that classical political economists mistakenly identified specific phenomena under capitalist production relations (such as the commodification of labor power and capital accumulation) as eternal laws of economic activity, contemporary political realists similarly abstract competitive elections, multi-party checks and balances, and other institutional forms under liberal democratic systems into the inherent logic of politics itself.

Bird further argues that contest-fetishism constitutes not merely an epistemological misrecognition, but rather an institutionalized practice with self-reproductive capacity. Within this practical structure, political participants are required to internalize a specific mode of subjectivity—namely, the identity of "competitors." The legitimacy of political expression no longer derives from the truthfulness or morality of its content, but depends upon compliance with established competitive rules. This highly proceduralized political practice gradually deprives participants of their capacity for critical reflection upon the institution itself, redirecting their energies entirely toward strategic considerations of how to "win" within predetermined rules.

In their study of Norwegian digitalization policy, Henningsen and Larsen identified the presence of similar "mystification processes" within the domain

of technological governance, paralleling those observed in the political sphere. Their central observation concerns the operation of fetishistic processes within digitalization policy discourse that warrant serious consideration. Specifically, they argue that "one must take into account the process of fetishism which is at work in this policy discourse. Combined, these processes lead to digitalization being perceived as a force which is external to social relations, dictating action on the part of actors working within the sector." [14]

This formulation reveals a critical problem in digitalization governance: when technological progress is represented as an objective, irresistible external force, policymakers and social actors tend to perceive it as a natural law that transcends human agency and social choice, believing themselves capable only of passive adaptation and response to this "technological imperative." However, as Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism demonstrates, this cognition precisely obscures the actual social relations underlying technological development—namely, how specific power structures, interest distributions, and institutional arrangements shape the direction and application of technological advancement. When digitalization is mystified as an external driving force, the power structures and interest configurations behind it are effectively concealed, preventing critical reflection on the social consequences of technological policies.

This finding provides important empirical support for understanding the logical continuity from political fetishism to digital fetishism, demonstrating that the epistemological structure of fetishism operates through similar mechanisms across different social domains.

3.2 Digital Fetishism: A New Ideological Form of Algorithmic Capitalism

Digital fetishism, as a novel ideological form under contemporary capitalist conditions, derives its theoretical significance from revealing the power structures concealed beneath the veneer of technological neutrality. This concept extends the critical tradition of Marx's commodity fetishism theory, redirecting focus toward how digital technologies obscure their inherent social power relations. Christian Fuchs, in his systematic theoretical construction of digital capitalism spanning from 2015 to 2025, observes: "Digital capitalism means aspects of the capitalist societal formation where digital technologies mediate the

accumulation of capital in the capitalist economy, the accumulation of decision-power in the political system, and the accumulation of reputation in the cultural system"[15]. This definition clarifies the mediating role of digital technologies within the capitalist social formation, demonstrating their intervention not only in capital accumulation within the economic sphere, but also their penetration into the accumulation processes of political power and cultural reputation.

Under conditions of digital capitalism, labor forms exhibit novel characteristics. Although digital labor differs from traditional industrial labor in its manifestational forms, its essence remains as an object of exploitation by digital capital, constituting the foundation for digital capital's persistence and expansion. The distinctive feature of this exploitative relationship lies in its concealment—digital management strategies package overtime work and control as processes of self-realization through mechanisms such as "gamification" and "participatory management."

Fuchs further analyzes: "In digital knowledge labour, the power of digital capital (digital potestas) appears to be invisible to workers. Exploitation and self-exploitation do not feel alienated but like fun, self-fulfilment, play, and pleasure" [16]. This mechanism of "pleasurable exploitation" effectively conceals the production processes of both absolute and relative surplus value, whereby workers engage in self-exploitation while ostensibly enjoying the "pleasure" of their work.

Therefore, the critical significance of digital fetishism lies in its dual revelation: it not only exposes the non-neutrality of algorithmic systems, but more importantly unveils how digital capitalism transforms exploitative relations into the illusion of voluntary participation through ideological operations, thereby achieving a deeper level of control over laborers.

Within the theoretical framework of digital fetishism, the concept of "invisibilization of labour" proposed by Gandini et al. (2023) constitutes a key dimension for understanding its ideological function. This concept profoundly reveals how digital platforms systematically obscure the human labor that sustains their operations through algorithmic design. In the operational logic of the contemporary digital economy, content moderators, data annotators, and various service providers within the "gig economy," despite constituting the core force of platform value creation, have their labor presented through algorithmic mediation as

"automated" services. This mode of presentation generates an illusion whereby value appears to derive from the efficacy of technology itself rather than from the practices of concrete laborers.

Gandini et al. astutely observe: "The invisibilization of labour. At its heart is capital's ability to conceal the contribution of labour-power to the valorization process. Pushed by the current wave of commodification, capital captures a growing share of workers' unremunerated labour-time at the expense of their formally paid share. In doing so, capital is able to seize from workers an ever-increasing quota of productive labour-time from their working day"[17]. This analysis reveals the core contradiction of digital capitalism: capital conceals labor-power's contribution to the valorization process through technological means, thereby appropriating increasing amounts of unpaid labor time.

The theoretical significance of this invisibilization mechanism lies in its compulsion for us to reexamine the value creation process in the digital age. Value creation has extended far beyond the traditional category of "paid labor time," becoming highly dependent upon substantial amounts of "unrecognized yet indispensable labor." From user-generated content to data annotation required for algorithmic training, from emotional labor to platform workers' waiting time, these labor forms that constitute critical links in the digital value chain are often excluded from formal labor statistics and compensation systems.

More critically, this analysis directs our attention toward a fundamental question: the determination of labor value is neither a technical nor economic constant, but rather a political process profoundly influenced by class struggle and the balance of social forces. Digital platforms transform this tension-laden political process into seemingly objective technological computation through the illusion of algorithmic technological neutrality. Consequently, the invisibilization of labor not only materially deprives workers of bargaining power and organizational possibilities, but also ideologically reinforces the myth of technological determinism, leading people to believe that platform efficiency derives from algorithmic optimization rather than labor contribution, and that value distribution is determined by technological logic rather than social relations. This constitutes the core mechanism through which digital fetishism sustains and reproduces itself.

3.3 *Beyond Digital Fetishism: A Dual Path of Critical Theory and Institutional Innovation*

There is a broad scholarly consensus that digital technologies do not merely reflect or extend existing forms of fetishism but instead create new mystification mechanisms with distinct characteristics. Central to this new form of fetishism is the way it conceals not only the underlying social power relations behind technological systems but also transforms human subjectivity itself into calculable, predictable, and controllable objects through datafication and algorithmization.

Having established the existence of fetishistic misrecognition within digital capitalism and political domains, the critical question becomes: how can we lift the ideological "veil" of digital fetishism and regain clarity about the social relations it conceals? Digital technologies are neither neutral nor autonomous forces but rather products of human labor and social relations. Just as Marx sought to dissolve commodity fetishism by revealing labor's central role in value creation, we must similarly expose the concrete labor, conflicting interests, and power relations concealed within digital systems.

First, it is crucial to reveal the reality hidden by digital fetishism. Behind seemingly autonomous applications and platforms lies an extensive network of invisible workers, such as content moderators, data annotators, and logistics workers. This invisibilization of labor is a deliberate capitalist strategy to perpetuate the myth that value originates from technology rather than labor.

The task of Marxist critique is demystification—to make invisible labor and power relations visible again. We must expose the creative labor of engineers behind artificial intelligence, the low-paid workforce in data annotation, and the precarity of gig economy workers. By highlighting digital systems as socially constructed entities, we can reassert that these technologies are not governed by natural laws but rather can be reshaped through human agency.

However, epistemological critique alone is insufficient to fully overcome digital fetishism; practical and institutional transformations are also necessary. Marxism emphasizes the integration of ideological change with transformations in material conditions. This implies challenging the economic institutions underpinning digital fetishism and

envisioning alternative digital models such as platform cooperatives or public digital infrastructures. Platform cooperatives, jointly owned and democratically governed by users and workers, fundamentally reject fetishistic logic through their principles of democratic management and non-profit orientation. Similarly, transforming public media platforms into non-commercial entities represents an important exploration to ensure digital services prioritize public interest.

Ultimately, resolving the issue of digital fetishism depends on transforming the socio-economic conditions that give rise to it. As long as digital technologies develop according to capitalism's profit-driven logic, fetishistic illusions will persist. Thus, overcoming digital fetishism is closely linked to class struggle and democratization processes, necessitating increased power for digital platform workers through unions, collective bargaining, and political mobilization, as well as the repoliticization of data ownership, algorithmic design, and labor arrangements.

Addressing the challenges posed by digital fetishism requires critical theoretical construction combined with practical institutional innovation. This involves not only developing specific governance mechanisms such as algorithmic auditing, data sovereignty, and platform publicization but fundamentally rethinking the relationship between humans and technology. Just as Marx's critique of commodity fetishism points toward possibilities beyond capitalism, the critique of digital fetishism should open imaginative paths toward technological democratization—a new technological-social relationship where algorithms cease to be mystified instruments of domination and instead become collective tools that serve human emancipation.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the evolution and contemporary implications of Marx's theory of fetishism, tracing its progression from religious and commodity fetishism to its modern manifestation as digital fetishism. Revisiting Marx's foundational analysis, the study underscores how social relations become mystified as inherent properties of objects within distinct historical contexts. Initially conceptualized by scholars such as Charles de Brosses, fetishism was substantially redefined by Marx into a powerful critique aimed at exposing concealed capitalist structures.

Further, engaging with recent contributions from Japanese Marxist scholarship, particularly Masahide Ishizuka's conceptual distinction between "positive fetishism" and "negative fetishism" (idolatry), the analysis offers a nuanced framework for understanding fetishistic phenomena. Ishizuka's distinction underscores the necessity of perceiving fetishism not as a fixed natural condition, but as historically contingent social relations susceptible to human intervention. This "denaturalizing" perspective revives Marx's revolutionary intention to uncover hidden social relations and restore human agency.

Within contemporary algorithmic capitalism, digital fetishism emerges prominently as an ideological mechanism that systematically obscures labor, class interests, and underlying power relations. By representing algorithmic processes as autonomous and objective forces, digital platforms perpetuate labor exploitation and erode collective agency. The concept of "invisibilization of labor" effectively illuminates this dynamic, highlighting the subtle appropriation of unpaid labor under the guise of technological neutrality.

The paper contends that overcoming digital fetishism necessitates not only rigorous epistemological critique but also significant institutional reform. Marx's critical approach mandates demystifying technological structures by exposing their historical and social foundations. However, theoretical critique alone remains insufficient. Structural transformations—including democratic governance of algorithms, enhanced platform transparency, cooperative ownership models, and public digital infrastructures—are essential. Ultimately, dismantling digital fetishism requires democratizing technology to foster socio-technical arrangements that empower collective agency and human emancipation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Project: supported by "the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (ZY2520) - Research on Marx's Theory of Fetishism and the Reconstruction of Social Subjectivity in Contemporary Society".

REFERENCES

- [1] Brosses, Charles de. *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* (History of Voyages to the Southern Lands). Paris: Durand, 1756.
- [2] De Brosses, Charles. *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (On the Worship of Fetish Gods, or a Comparison between the Ancient Religion of Egypt and the Present Religion of Nigritia). Geneva: Cramer, 1760.
- [3] Morris, Rosalind C., and Daniel H. Leonard. *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea*. With a new translation of *On the Worship of Fetish Gods*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. p.vii. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/RSR.13650>
- [4] MEGA² II/1. Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2006, p. 567.
- [5] Karl Marx·Friedrich Engels Werke Band 23. Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1962, p.86.
- [6] Miconi, Andrea. "On digital fetishism: a critique of the big data paradigm." *Critical Sociology* 50.4-5, 2024, pp. 629-642. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205231202873>
- [7] Ishizuka, Masahide. *Marukusu no "Fetishism Note" o Yomu* (Reading Marx's "Fetishism Note"). Tokyo: Shakai Hyoronsha, 2018, p. 78.
- [8] MEGA² IV/1. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976, pp. 320ff.
- [9] Karl Marx·Friedrich Engels Werke Band 1. Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1981. 91.
- [10] MEGA² IV/1. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976, p.324.
- [11] Karl Marx·Friedrich Engels Werke Band 23. Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1962, p.87.
- [12] Tabata, Minoru. *Marukusu to Tetsugaku* (Marx and Philosophy). Tokyo: Shinsensha, 2004, p. 201.
- [13] Bird, Colin. "How Not to Be a Realist: The Case of Contest-Fetishism." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 41.1, 2024, pp. 181-202. DOI:10.1017/S0265052524000384
- [14] Henningsen, Erik, and Håkon Larsen. "The mystification of digital technology in Norwegian policies on archives, libraries and museums: digitalization as policy imperative." (2020). DOI:10.1017/S0265052524000384

- [15] Fuchs, C. Digital Capitalism. London: Routledge. 2022.
- [16] Fuchs, Christian. "Antonio Negri, Spinoza, Marx, and Digital Capitalism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2025): 01914537241308108.
- [17] Cini, Lorenzo. "How algorithms are reshaping the exploitation of labour-power: insights into the process of labour invisibilization in the platform economy." *Theory and society* 52.5 (2023): 885-911. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-023-09520>