The Front Line is Everywhere:  
For a Critique of Radical Commodities

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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September 2006
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Haylock for proofreading a draft of this dissertation.
Contents

1 Abstract

3 Introduction

Part I – For a Genealogy of the Radical Commodity

23 Chapter 1 – The Problem of the Commodity
The dualistic commodity — The problematic of socially necessary labour — Toward a tripartite commodity: the fetishism of commodities — The radicalism of the commodity-form —
The ubiquitous commodity and the commodified subject

37 Chapter 2 – Toward the Possibility of a Non-invidious Commodity
The honour of exploitation — Emulation and the evidence of power — Marx versus Veblen —
The utility of waste — Emulation beyond the pecuniary — The superlative object of invidious comparison — The non-invidious commodity — The subversive commodity — Strategies and Tactics

61 Chapter 3 – The Commodity as a Signifier of Lost Relationships
A nascent semiology of the object — An anatomy of the sign and of linguistic value: context and difference — Objects as social discriminants: the sign-object, or the sign-value of the commodity —
Signs versus symbols, or: signification versus the symbolic — The illusion of equality —
The ‘liberation’ of the individual

87 Chapter 4 – The Commodity as an Ideological Object
The object of ideology — The ideological basis of needs and utility — The essence of ideology —
The dissolution of reality — The dawn of the era of simulation

107 Chapter 5 – The Question of the Political
Against the critique of ideology — The hegemonic form of politics — The antagonism of the social — Pinpointing the convergence of truth and ideology

127 Chapter 6 – Toward a Politics of the Radical Commodity
Radical democracy in the sphere of commodities — The radical significance of the logic of equivalence — The irruption of the symbolic — Terrorism as symptom and as ideological fantasy-object — The radicalism of the sublime — Two paths of resistance: the hegemonic and the sublime — Relocating a politics of resistance

Part II – For a Politics of Radical Commodities

151 Chapter 7 – Delineating the Radical Commodity
For a taxonomy of radical commodities — Radical commodities as propaganda — On floating signifieds, or: ethically projected commodities and the radicalism of difference — The manifest paradox

165 Chapter 8 – Revolution™: Radical Commodities and Branding
A (very) brief history of branding — Branding as an extension of the commodity-form —
The complicity of consumers — The radical significance of brands: the overdetermined object

181 Chapter 9 – The Thin Line: Radical Commodities and Incorporation
Incorporation through naturalisation and spectacularisation — The commodity form of incorporation — The consumption/consummation of Revolution — Radical chic — ‘Anti-brand brands’ and the impossibility of externality — In defence of radical commodities — Ironic consumption, culture jamming and the materialisation of radicalism — Reassessing the question of incorporation

213 Conclusion: Radical Commodities Today
Abstract

This dissertation addresses the phenomenon of ‘radical commodities’—commercial products which advance an oppositional politics. Examples of such include the products of Rage Against The Machine, a ‘revolutionary’ rock band; Michael Moore, a best-selling author and award-winning documentary filmmaker; Naomi Klein, a journalist and author of the international bestseller *No Logo*; The Body Shop, a multinational manufacturer and retailer of ‘natural’ cosmetics and toiletries; Freitag, a company which manufactures bags, wallets and other fashionable accessories from recycled materials, and; the Adbusters Media Foundation, publisher of *Adbusters* magazine and producer of Blackspot shoes. Radical commodities are fundamentally paradoxical objects whose apparent ethic would appear to be at odds with the fact that they are commodities. This dissertation asks: can a commodity-object legitimately serve as a vehicle for social and political critique?

It is reasoned that the problem of radical commodities is principally structural. Marx’s seminal writings on the commodity accordingly represent the logical point of departure. The Marxian analysis illuminates not only the commodity-structure, but also the political problematic which emerges from that structure—for Marx, the commodity is a mechanism of exploitation. From an orthodox Marxist perspective, the idea of a radical commodity would therefore be most contradictory, or indeed impossible. It is argued, however, that the Marxian analysis is inconclusive.

This dissertation traces a genealogy of analyses of the commodity, which variously advance or diverge from the orthodox Marxist position. From a perspective of the consumption of commodity-objects, the radical commodity would appear to be possible. Yet, the relationship between the commodity-structure and the capitalist ideology runs deep. The question of the radical commodity is therefore markedly more complex than it might initially appear. With regard to the ideological consequence of the commodity-structure, however, certain streams of post-Marxist analysis are themselves problematic, for they ultimately short-circuit historical critique and destabilise the very possibility of politics. In contrast, this dissertation seeks to reaffirm a place for politics and, in so doing, to establish the theoretical possibility of radical commodities.

To contend that the idea of a radical commodity is not fundamentally contradictory, however, says nothing of the political potency of such objects. These are undoubtedly complex objects, whose peculiarities cannot be ascertained by abstract theorisation alone. For this reason, this dissertation also employs empirical analyses of a number of radical commodities.

In sum, it is argued that the sphere of commodities should be admitted as a possible site for the expression or implementation of a radical politics, and thus that radical commodities should be understood as a legitimate vehicle for social and political critique, but that such objects are by no means free from contradiction, and that the political efficacy of these products is anything but guaranteed.
Introduction

In a melodic lull between walls of sound, Zack de la Rocha—vocalist of rap/rock band Rage Against The Machine—growls: “With this mic device; I spit nonfiction; Who got the power?; This be my question”. In these four short lines, de la Rocha neatly captures the essence of his band’s political strategy, namely the use of popular music as a vehicle for social critique. In this vein, he has stated: “I don’t recognise the boundaries between music and political action” (de la Rocha, quoted in Raphael 1996). Yet, if we consider the fact that the band was signed to Epic Records, a subsidiary of the multinational behemoth Sony Music, the same lyrics also point to the fundamental contradiction of the band’s strategic position. The members of Rage Against The Machine (RATM, a.k.a. ‘Rage’) claimed that revolutionary motives underlay their project, but their music was and is, undeniably, a cultural commodity. Specifically, on the one hand, their music generated income for a sizeable multinational corporation, and indeed it no doubt continues to do so; on the other hand, it may be understood that any instance of the production of commodities serves to perpetuate both the ideology and the structural relations of capitalism. For example, Jean Baudrillard goes so far as to say that “everything in monopoly capitalist society … is reproduced, from the outset, immediately, as an element of the system, as an integrated variable” (1981: 87). Thus, however revolutionary the music of RATM might appear, and however revolutionary the group might have supposed itself to be, it cannot be denied that, as a commodity, the group’s music also perpetuates, in no small measure, that ‘machine’ against which the group was purportedly raging. And so we must ask: is the notion of a radical commodity irreconcilably contradictory, unequivocally hypocritical, or might political action be legitimately effected through commodified means?

To explicate, I use the term ‘radical commodities’ to describe commercial products which, like the music of RATM, advance an oppositional politics. These products are fundamentally paradoxical objects whose apparent ethic is patently at odds with their commodified state. In the sphere of ‘cultural’ commodities, the radical commodity might be represented not only by political rock music, but also, for example, by leftist magazines, tendentious films, and cultural-critiques-turned-bestsellers. Of course, radical commodities are not only found in the explicitly cultural sphere. So-called ‘ethical’ commodities—products which are unusually eco-friendly or humanitarian—might also be understood as radical. It should be noted that many radical commodities, even those of the ‘cultural’ variety, are distinguished by the fact that they do not merely advocate an alternative politics. Many of these objects also actualise such a politics. RATM, for example, held benefit concerts to help fund the legal representation of incarcerated activists and other (so-called) political prisoners.
There has been some discussion, in more recent years, of the problem of resistance in (or to) everyday life. The question of radical commodities, however, can be distinguished from much of this dialogue, and indeed, for the most part, it might be defined negatively by its relationship thereto. That is to say, much of the existing literature is concerned with such themes as consumer activism and subcultural resistance. The present study, however, is principally concerned not with resistance through consumption, but rather with resistance through production. In this age of corporate omnipresence, it is seemingly forgotten, all too often, that ‘the system’ is not a corporeal other, that it is not alone responsible for the creation of goods, and thus that access to the means of production may at times coincide, in an individual or a group, with a sentiment of resistance. Therefore, the study of radical commodities might also be understood as a critique of the doing of activism through commodified means. Needless to say, such activism is fraught with contradictions and faces numerous complications. Some of these contradictions are readily apparent. More than one review in the popular press, for example, has pointed out the inconsistency between RATM’s political message and the group’s affiliation with Sony. More troubling, however, are those contradictions which are structural in nature—those contradictions which issue from the very structure of commodity exchange, and which are therefore less readily discerned. Accordingly, this dissertation is focussed, first and foremost, upon the question of the commodity-structure as it pertains to politics.

The critique of the structure of the commodity finds its most significant figure in Karl Marx. For this reason, the work of Marx, and that of his theoretical progeny, is of inestimable importance to the present study. Yet, Marx’s view of the commodity, and of the capitalist system which it underlies, is most disparaging. Indeed, in his view, when money—which is the universal form of the commodity (see Marx 1976a: 162–163), and hence “the object par excellence” (Marx 1963: 180)—becomes the ascendant intermediary of social exchange, humankind’s “slavery … attains its peak” (1963: 179). If, with the Marxian analysis in mind, we recall the above-cited quote from Baudrillard, it would seem not only that we cannot escape the logic of the commodity, but also that the commodity bears most deleterious effects. How, then, could any commodified object legitimately foster a progressive politics?

In spite of the manifold contradictions and complications of such a practice, it is my thesis that there is indeed scope for radicalism within the realm of the commodity. This would initially seem to run contrary to much of what has been written on the subject of the commodity, particularly that which follows the Marxian tradition. However, as I shall demonstrate, a critical review of this canon reveals that there are in fact grounds for the conceptualisation of a legitimately radical commodity. My argument, therefore, is effectively bipartite. On the one hand, by way of a critique of the sociology of the commodity, I contend that the structure of the commodity, whilst certainly disquieting, cannot, in the final analysis, be understood as wholly exclusive of a radical politics. On the other hand, and subsequently, I contend, with regard to
the various complexities of radical commodity-objects, that certain practical considerations might serve to bolster the political efficacy of such objects. (I should emphasise, however, that I do not allege that radical commodities could overcome the problematic of the commodity-form itself.)

Whilst I have thus delineated the particular thrust of this study, it should also be acknowledged that the question of radical commodities has remarkably far-reaching implications. That is to say, an analysis of the commodity-form (or the ‘commodity-structure’) is essential to a rigorous critique of radical commodities, and yet the problem of the commodity-form cannot be isolated from that of capitalist society itself. Georg Lukács, for example, posits that

It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure. … That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. (1971: 83)

Hence, the problem of capitalist society ‘in all its aspects’ is necessarily drawn into the purview of this study. Specifically, however, it should be understood that a critique of radical commodities demands not only a detailed understanding of the structure of the commodity (particularly in its contemporarily advanced state of development), but also an idea of the possible scope of a radical politics in the context of late-capitalism, and of the strategic direction in which such a politics might proceed. For these reasons, it is indeed the case that the question of radical commodities is inseparable from a critique of capitalist society.¹

**On method**

As intimated above, I approach the question of radical commodities principally by way of a critical theoretical method, that is, by way of an approach which draws critically upon the Marxian heritage. There is a limit to what can be said, at this stage, with regard to the development of this analysis, since, by its very nature, its particularities are established during the course of tracing a genealogy of method. Nevertheless, the development of my argument may be summarised as follows. Marx’s work, particularly when understood in relation to the subsequent work of Lukács, gives us an insight into the embeddedness of the structure of the commodity. In the Marxian view, the only way out of the problematic intrinsic to the commodity-form is the overthrow of the capitalist system by the worker, who is Marx’s revolutionary subject; it is imagined that an ideal society will thereafter transpire.

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¹ Notably, just as Marx began with an analysis of commodities when he sought to ‘portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature’, so an analysis of commodities serves as a foundation for a critique of those elementary Marxian principles which have informed so much critical thought during the past century.
Such a revolution, however, has not eventuated, nor does it seem likely. In light of this, it is necessary to establish the possibility of an agency of resistance within the structural confines of the capitalist system. This we find in a nascent form in the work of Thorstein Veblen, whose concept of conspicuous consumption admits an agency—however qualified—of the consuming subject. We also find in the work of Michel de Certeau, and in that of Fiske after him, a more specifically radical analogue of that variety of agency which can be seen in Veblen’s analyses. Consequently, however, we must begin a renewed journey to determine the extent to which the logic of capitalism is entrenched in the social. With Baudrillard, we uncover a complicity of the logic of the commodity and that of language itself—Lukács’s above-quoted observation, namely that there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to the question of the structure of the commodity, thus rings true. To pursue this logic to its very limits, Slavoj Zizek’s particular interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes most useful, as do the related analyses of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Finally, Part I suggests a space within ‘the system’ in which a politics of resistance might be possible.

Insofar as it is roughly chronological, this critical review takes the form of a genealogy of analyses which bear upon the question of the radical commodity. A study of the phenomenon of radical commodities, however, could not legitimately proceed without also contemplating the practical peculiarities of this most idiosyncratic class of objects. For this reason, in addition to the genealogical work described above, which is expressly theoretical, I also turn my attention, particularly in the later chapters, to a number of real-world examples, that is, to the work of a number of producers of commodities that may be understood as radical. These include not only Rage Against The Machine, as mentioned above, but also Michael Moore, best-selling author and award-winning documentary filmmaker; Naomi Klein, journalist and author of the international bestseller No Logo; The Body Shop, the multinational manufacturer and retailer of nature-inspired cosmetics and toiletries; Freitag, a company which manufactures bags, wallets and other fashionable accoutrements from recycled truck tarpaulins, bicycle inner tubes and seatbelts, and, lastly; the Adbusters Media Foundation, publishers of Adbusters magazine, and creators of ‘Buy Nothing Day’ and ‘TV Turn-Off Week’. All of these cases are paradoxical to the core, for each advances, in some measure, an oppositional political position, yet they all tender unequivocally commercial products—and indeed highly successful ones at that.

It should be noted that whilst the more empirical aspects of this study are no more important than the critical theoretical parts, nor are they necessarily less so. The two emphases function as necessary counterpoints to one another. An analysis of real-world examples of the radical commodity would not alone reveal the structure of the

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2 I must point out, however, that this is not a genealogy in the Nietzschean or Foucauldian sense. Whilst I trace, in some measure, the development of the commodity-form through an essentially chronological review of analyses of the commodity, the genealogical character of this exercise is not of key methodological significance.
commodity-form and the problem thereof; conversely, a purely theoretical analysis, however critical, would not account for those idiosyncrasies of radical commodities which arise only in practice. The thesis is divided into two parts, which roughly correspond to these two emphases. Part I—Chapters One through Six—traces a genealogy of the radical commodity, as discussed above, whilst Part II—Chapters Seven through Nine—is comprised of thematic analyses of the observable complications and contradictions of such commodities. Whilst the empirical examples are invoked throughout the entire dissertation, they are drawn upon much more closely in Part II; specifically, the later chapters serve to variously extend or qualify the propositions of Part I. For this reason, in Part II, my approach is largely consistent with that which Glaser and Strauss (1967) label “grounded theory”; the authors define this as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (1967: 2). The ‘grounded theory’ approach, in other words, entails a process whereby theories are continually evaluated in relation to the data that they wish to describe.3

Insofar as I have focussed upon a particular few examples of radical commodities, which inform the discussions of Part II of my thesis, my approach is also consistent with a case-study method.4 Of course, the object of my study is the phenomenon of radical commodities as a whole, and not a specific instance thereof; for this reason, mine is not a case study in the sense in which this term is commonly understood. That is to say, to borrow the terminology of Robert Stake (1995: 3–4), mine is not an “intrinsic” case study, since I am not interested in any of the cases per se; rather, this is a case study of the “instrumental” variety, i.e., a study wherein case analysis is employed in pursuit of a perspective of a more general phenomenon. Of course, a single case could not alone provide a sufficient richness or diversity of data from which to approach an understanding of the phenomenon of radical commodities as a whole. Thus, to be precise, the particular variety of case study here employed, where multiple cases serve an instrumental role in shedding light upon a broader phenomenon, is understood by Stake (1995: 4) as a “collective case study”. To reiterate, however, my use of case study must be understood in the context of a ‘grounded theory’ approach, and with regard for the place of the latter, in turn, within the field of critical theory. The motivation for this study’s empirical component issues from the potential of qualitative empirical work to challenge and extend the more purely theoretical work of Part I. My use of a case study method is intended to reveal

3 Glaser and Strauss “contrast this position with theory generated from a priori assumptions” (1967: 3) and suggest that this approach to the development of theory should consequently improve the ‘fit’ of that theory—i.e., its applicability and relevance to the object of analysis. It should not be assumed, however, that the inclusion of more empirical analyses, or a ‘grounded theory’ approach, could necessarily render a study objective, since it might be argued that no researcher or theorist could ever completely escape his or her partialities. Indeed, the very doing of theory is itself fraught with problems, because, as we will see, all of language is to some extent ideological, which is to say that language serves, in some measure, to reproduce prevailing modes of thinking and, likewise, existing structures of power. The whole institution of theory is therefore implicated in an ideological loop. Beyond an acknowledgement of their existence, however, such problems are beyond the scope of this thesis.

4 Case study is of course a definitively qualitative method, and is thus well-suited to a ‘grounded theory’ approach; Glaser and Strauss posit that “the crucial elements of sociological theory are often found best with a qualitative method” (1967: 18).
those problems of radical commodities which are peculiar to such objects in practice. At different times, these real-world examples are used to explain, corroborate, critique or call into question different concepts and analyses.

On a more practical note, I should briefly describe the types of empirical data that I draw upon. These include press reportage, reviews and critiques, analyses of the radical commodity-objects themselves, and such sundry matter as press releases, advertisements and other marketing material. Of note is the fact that, as will be seen, the authors’ reflections on their practices—specifically with regard to their politics and their motives—are well represented, particularly by way of interviews in the press, but also because they are frequently explicated in the products themselves.

Overview of cases

In order to better provide some foundation for the analyses and discussions to come, and so as to better define the variety of object that is the focus of this dissertation, I shall, at this point, offer more detailed introductions to those radical commodities to which I will refer during the course of my analysis. These commodities—namely the products of RATM, Michael Moore, Naomi Klein, The Body Shop, Freitag and the Adbusters Media Foundation, as specified previously—were selected because all are rich examples of the complex and paradoxical nature of the radical commodity. Collectively, they represent the phenomenon of the radical commodity across a range of media and cultural forms. Moreover, the radical commodity is thus represented diversely as regards national origin, political aims, fiscal might and strategic approach. These cases are conspicuously global in their scope; this itself is a significant detail. In the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels had already recognised the globalising tendency of capitalism: “[t]he need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere” (Marx and Engels 1971). Indeed, it could hardly be denied that capitalism has played a significant part in that process of globalisation which has been gathering momentum for the past two centuries, and which continues unabated; accordingly, it may be understood that the paradox of the radical commodity is most pronounced in globalised commodities, such as those which are included in the present analysis. In sum, since all of the cases included here are markedly successful in economic terms—and are indeed, in many regards, rather mainstream—yet insofar as each nevertheless espouses an oppositional politics, it might be understood that they collectively reveal many of the most strident contradictions of the radical commodity.

Rage Against The Machine

Of the cases studied in this dissertation, the band Rage Against The Machine is (or, rather, was) perhaps the most fervent. Although the group itself has now disbanded, its inclusion in this study is fundamental, on account of the impact that it had upon both critical and popular conceptions of the political potency of popular music.
Formed in Los Angeles in 1991, RATM consisted of Zack de la Rocha (vocals), Tom Morello (guitar), Tim Commerford (bass) and Brad Wilk (drums). The group released four albums—Rage Against The Machine (1992), Evil Empire (1996), The Battle of Los Angeles (1999) and an album of covers, Renegades (2000)—before they disbanded in October of 2000. A fifth album—Live at the Grand Olympic Auditorium (2003), a compilation of live recordings—was released subsequent to the group’s dissolution. At its peak during the late ’nineties, RATM was contemporaneous with many groups that epitomised the ‘grunge’ era, thus with groups which were predominantly either apolitical or characterised by an introspective politics. By virtue of its explicitly political stance, RATM was therefore something of an anomaly. RATM’s music—a synthesis of punk, heavy metal/rock and rap, which was itself stylistically innovative in its time—includes themes which variously criticise US foreign policy, political apathy, corporate media saturation and censorship, and other social injustices. The band’s music, cover art, video clips and merchandise also frequently draw attention to such causes as the Zapatista movement in Mexico, the labour movement, and the plight of minority political figures (allegedly) wrongly accused of murders, specifically African American journalist and broadcaster Mumia Abu-Jamal and American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier. Moreover, not only did the group promote a number of political organisations through its music, video clips, and merchandise, but so too did it make financial contributions to several of these, typically by way of benefit concerts.

During their time as Rage Against The Machine, the band members were self-professed activists, individually and collectively. The band was purportedly the manifestation of a vision that saw music employed as a means to reach a political end; their passion for creating music was purportedly driven not by financial want, or by aspirations to fame (except where fame might have served as a means to a political end), or even, primarily, by artistic objectives, but rather by a desire to disseminate a message encouraging a critical social awareness (Howell 1993). Yet, as was mentioned in the opening paragraph, the band was signed to Epic Records, a subsidiary of the multinational Sony. Predictably, given their political stance, this was an association for which the group was often criticised, and yet signing with Sony was a decision that the band members strongly defended, on the grounds that RATM was thereby afforded a much larger audience than it could otherwise have hoped for:

We push our agenda with every song, every tee shirt, every interview. We’re the Trojan horse. The entertainment industry is in the palm of some very corporate hands, and it’s extremely difficult for radical or revolutionary artists in this country to get their

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5 Their dissolution came about when de la Rocha left the band. This departure was the culmination of a history of creative and interpersonal tension, which had in the past fuelled many rumours of their break-up. He stated in a press release at the time that “I feel that it is now necessary to leave Rage because our decision-making process has completely failed … It is no longer meeting the aspirations of all four of us collectively as a band and, from my perspective, has undermined our artistic and political ideal” (quoted in DeCurtis 2001).

6 This vision, however, belonged fundamentally to de la Rocha and Morello, the true political driving forces of the group. Thus, notably, the role of group spokesperson was typically rotated between these two members.
message to a mass audience. We have that opportunity for one reason and one reason
only—we move millions of units. (Morello, quoted in Holthouse 1996)

In a similar vein, de la Rocha has maintained that “although a lot of people criticised
us for being in bed with our enemies, I disagree. I think that it’s a mutually
exploitative situation” (quoted in Raphael 1996). Strategic motives aside, however,
the fundamental paradox of the band’s situation could not be ignored. David
Holthouse, for example, observed that Morello was a “Harvard graduate … [playing]
guitar for a platinum-selling band with hit songs that advocate class warfare” (1996).

**Michael Moore**

Michael Moore is a filmmaker and an author, and is renowned for a critical
journalistic style that is laced with sarcastic humour. His books to date include
and *Dude, Where’s My Country?* (2003). It is his broadcast and film work, however,
for which he is perhaps better known. His television series *TV Nation* and *The Awful
Truth* have been screened in a number of countries, to popular acclaim, and he
received an Emmy Award for the former. His earlier films—*Roger & Me* (Moore et
al. 1990) and *The Big One* (1998)—are cult classics. Moore’s international profile
surged, however, with the release of *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore et al. 2003), a
documentary that ‘takes aim at America’s love affair with guns and violence’, for
which he received an Academy Award. His most recent film, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore
et al. 2004), was met with similar acclaim—for that film, Moore received the 2004
Cannes Film Festival’s Palme d’Or. Notably, in an interesting association that might
be understood as an example of (radical) brand synergy, Moore also directed the
video clips for two of Rage Against The Machine’s last singles, namely ‘Testify’ and
‘Sleep Now in the Fire’.

Moore’s various works are socio-political exposés, intended to be readily
accessible. Many of his critiques are focussed, in essence, on the ways in which class
conflict manifests itself in contemporary American life. It would seem, however, that
Moore’s work—particularly his film and broadcast work—is often intended as
something more than mere criticism. Indeed, it is notably interventionist in its style.
*Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, explicitly sought to influence the outcome of the 2004
US Presidential election; both its content and its release date attest to this. In a similar
vein, *Bowling for Columbine*—motivated by the Columbine High School
massacre—is a crusade against the ready availability in the United States of firearms
and ammunition. In one part of that film, Moore targets K-Mart in particular, and
successfully lobbies the company to change its policy as regards the sale of firearms
and ammunition.

Yet, in spite of his politics, and in a situation akin to RATM’s association with
Sony, most of Moore’s books are published by the Murdoch-owned HarperCollins.
The contradictions of his position are exacerbated by his phenomenal commercial
success—although renowned as a blue-collar worker from Flint, Michigan, he is
today a millionaire and lives in New York City (Bunbury 2002). Unsurprisingly, these contradictions have not gone unnoticed by his critics; David T Hardy and Jason Clarke point out that “Moore shows great disdain for that which he actually is … a very rich, pasty white American male” (2004).

Naomi Klein
Naomi Klein came to worldwide attention in 2000 with the publication of her best-selling book No Logo (Klein 2001a). Klein is an award-winning journalist with an internationally syndicated column that appears in The Nation, The Guardian and The Globe and Mail. Additionally, since No Logo, Klein has released two more books: Fences and Windows (Klein 2002), a collection of “dispatches from the front line of the globalisation debate”, and No War (Klein et al. 2005), a series of analyses of “America’s real business in Iraq”. Klein’s other works, however, are of less significance here; it is No Logo which is most pertinent to the present study.

According to its own blurb, No Logo is “[e]qual parts cultural analysis, mall-rat memoir, political manifesto and journalistic exposé”. The book documents some of the late-capitalist tendencies toward the exaltation of the brand at the expense of the product. Klein explores the relationship between brand-based marketing and sweatshop-like production practices; she describes this state of affairs as “degraded production in the age of the superbrand” (Klein 2001a: 195). Indeed, she examines both the implications of the ubiquity of branding in the first world and the effects in ‘developing’ countries of the corporate plunder of the global labour market.

Unsurprisingly, hers is a characteristically journalistic approach: No Logo contains many first-hand accounts of the labour and living conditions of third-world factory workers. No Logo crept into bookstores without fanfare, but seemingly became, in a few short months, required reading for academics and laypersons alike. That is to say, it apparently became required reading for all concerned citizens of the consumer society.

Of course, No Logo is a radical commodity; it is of significance to the present study by virtue of the apparent conflict between its critical content and its considerable commercial success.7 On the one hand, No Logo has been touted as “the Das Kapital of the growing anti-corporate movement” (Viner 2000); the book has also been described as a “call to arms” (Rustin 2000) and “the anti-corporate manifesto for a new generation of protesters” (Brayfield 2000). On the other hand, over a million copies of the book are in print, it has been translated into 27 languages, and it has reached bestseller status in eight countries (Schmidt 2003). Moreover, in spite of the book’s staunch and indeed effectively categorical criticism of multinational corporations, No Logo is published in the UK (and other Commonwealth countries) by Flamingo, an imprint of the Murdoch-owned HarperCollins. And, ironically, No Logo has become a brand in itself—one

7 No Logo occupies a somewhat curious place in this study, for whilst it is of analytic significance as an object, for the reasons given here, so too is Klein’s work of considerable theoretical pertinence to the question of radical commodities.
commentator sardonically asks: “anyone know where I can find a No Logo T-shirt?” (Burgess 2001).

Following the success of No Logo, Klein herself has been described as “probably the most influential person under the age of 35 in the world” (Brayfield 2000). Indeed, many flamboyant monikers have been bandied about to describe her: one reporter has called her “the pin-up revolutionary” and “an icon of anti-capitalism” (Orr 2000); others have dubbed her “the It-girl of anti-globalisation” and “a Princess of Protest” (Barwick and Gordon 2001). Yet, the book’s unexpected fashionability did not seem to diminish its radical political significance. George Monbiot (2001) reports that, during the 2001 World Economic Forum meeting in Switzerland, the simple act of carrying a copy of No Logo—or his own book, Captive State—constituted an offence. Indeed, persons carrying such books were barred from entering the country: No Logo was “deemed too dangerous to be allowed into the country at such a sensitive time” (Monbiot 2001).

The Body Shop

If any of the cases included in this study needed no introduction, surely that would be true of The Body Shop, if only by virtue of the ubiquity of its stores. The Body Shop International PLC is a retailer of “naturally inspired” skin- and hair-care products, which operates over 1,900 stores in 50 countries and 25 languages (The Body Shop International PLC 2002: 17). The Body Shop developed under the direction of the husband-and-wife team of Anita and Gordon Roddick. It is Anita, however, who is recognisable as the company’s public face, and as its political driving force. Whilst an ecological ethic was reportedly embedded in The Body Shop from the beginning (see Roddick 1991), Roddick has stated that, following The Body Shop’s successful flotation on the London stock exchange in April 1984 (and its subsequent value of £8 million), she began to see the company as a ‘force for social change’:

From that moment The Body Shop ceased to exist, at least in my eyes, as just another trading business. It became a force for social change. It became a lobby group to campaign on environmental and human rights issues. It became a communicator and an educator. (Roddick 1991: 110)

Thus, whilst it is evidently a most profitable concern, The Body Shop also claims to be a global corporate citizen, a campaigning organisation and a company that strives to be socially and environmentally responsible. Specifically, it purportedly operates according to a tenet of ‘profits with principles’.

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8 Also representative of the paradoxical nature of the book is the fact that Klein received, for No Logo, the 2001 Canadian National Business Book Award. As John Davidson (2001) observes, this is “a bit like nominating Karl Marx (posthumously, of course) to the Federal Reserve Board”.

9 Furthermore, Klein made the 2001 edition of Rolling Stone magazine’s ‘Hot List’, wherein she was named 2001’s ‘hot cultural critic’ (Anonymous 2001).

10 Naomi Klein has observed that The Body Shop “averaged between 120 and 150 store openings a year through the mid-eighties to the present” (2001a: 132).
Consistent with this philosophy, the company campaigns on a number of issues, principally in the areas of environmental conservation, human rights, fair trade, animal testing, and self-esteem, whilst it also avows to actualise in its own operations the values that it promotes in these regards. It is thus characterised by such institutional customs as its provision of the means for its customers to recycle or refill their Body Shop containers, its use of natural ingredients in its products, its ‘Trade Not Aid’ policy (i.e., its purchase, sale and promotion of fair-trade products), its investment in struggling communities, and its abstention from testing its products on animals. Moreover, The Body Shop has been recognised as a pioneer in the field of ethical accounting (Seeley 2000).

The Body Shop’s products would therefore appear to be manifestations of ethical and ecological best practice in the cosmetics industry. However, whilst The Body Shop might be the most well-known case included here, it might also be the most heavily criticised. This criticism issues principally from a perceived disparity between the company’s claims and its actual practices. Some of the most damning—but also the most compelling—exposés pertaining to The Body Shop’s corporate conduct must be those of Jon Entine. Entine’s work severely questions the company’s social and environmental integrity, and even queries the origins of the name and the underlying concept of the business (see Entine 2003; 2004). Regarding the company’s reputation, Naomi Klein—incidentally enough—has observed that the Body Shop—though it may well be the most progressive multinational on the planet—still has a tendency to display its good deeds in its store windows before getting its corporate house in order. Anita Roddick’s company has been the subject of numerous damning investigations in the press, which have challenged the company’s use of chemicals, its stand on unions and even its claim that its products have not been tested on animals. (Klein 2001a: 361)

Regarding this last point, it has been pointed out that many of the ingredients in The Body Shop’s products are tested on animals (see Entine 2003)—it is likely for this reason that the company no longer makes the claim of “no animal testing”, and today asserts instead that it is “against animal testing”.

Freitag
Freitag is a Swiss company—named after its founders, brothers Daniel and Markus Freitag—which is renowned for its ‘individual recycled freeway bags’. The business began with the brothers sewing messenger bags in their apartment, but it now occupies its own factory, employs over 40 staff, operates two retail stores, and turns out over 100,000 products per annum (Freitag lab. AG n.d.-b). The Freitag range today features over 30 models, and includes not only messenger bags but also

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11 The company established a custom of ethical and environmental self-assessment and regulation with the creation of its Environmental Projects Department in 1986 (Roddick 1991: 118); this was further formalised with the 1989 commissioning of “an environmental audit of all the company’s practices, focusing in particular on packaging, waste and effluents” (Roddick 1991: 242), and was consolidated in published form with the release of its first Values Report in 1995 (Roddick 2000: 77).
backpacks, handbags, totes and luggage, as well as other related products (such as wallets, laptop cases, soccer balls and punching bags). The Freitag bag has become a cult fashion item internationally: indeed, one of the brothers’ earliest prototypes—the very first version of the ‘Top Cat’—is featured in the collection of the Zürich Museum of Design, whilst a Top Cat bag can also be found in the design collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (Freitag lab. AG n.d.-a). Yet, most significantly, all of the company’s products are distinguished by the fact that they are manufactured from recycled materials, specifically used truck tarpaulins, bicycle inner tubes, seatbelts and, most recently, airbags. In a book which documents the history and processes of the company, Freitag (Müller 2001), Max Kung suggests that “this enterprise can … be seen as an expression of the brothers’ desire for a pristine environment and to save the Earth” (Kung, in Müller 2001: 135–139). Moreover, a corresponding ethic is seen in the company’s approach to production, at least insofar as it outsources part of its production to a workshop staffed by disabled people (Freitag lab. AG n.d.-b).

Of course, the company’s practice of recycling is fundamental to the identity of its product. Since every piece of every bag (or wallet, or football, etc.) is cut by hand from panels of truck tarpaulin, no two items are alike. “‘Each bag is unique’ was no advertising slogan; it was a simple statement of fact” (Müller 2001: 65). Simple fact or not, this uniqueness is, understandably, a key selling point—or, rather, the key selling point—of Freitag’s products. Indeed, the real significance of the company’s ethos of recycling would appear to lie not with the inherently eco-friendly character of its products, but rather with the products’ resultant distinctiveness. That is to say, in spite of the indisputably eco-friendly character of the materials used in the bags’ production, any ‘desire for a pristine environment’ that might underlie the whole enterprise is rarely visibly manifest. The question of ecology is of course discussed in the Freitag book, yet, even here, its appearance is brief. At the level of the surface of the products themselves (and their packaging), and at that of the company’s promotional materials (specifically its website and press releases—it does not advertise in the conventional sense), the question of ecology is never explicitly broached; the implicit ethic of sustainability is so downplayed that it is almost imperceptible.

In sum, where Freitag is concerned, the ethicality of recycling is overshadowed by the aesthetic thereof, that is, by the fashionability of each item’s resultant uniqueness. Yet, in this way, Freitag constitutes a marked exception to the norm. Whilst many companies present or suggest, as a marketing strategy, an environmentalism or an ethicality that is not actually realised in their products (such as is claimed of The Body Shop), Freitag’s products are considerably environmentally friendly, yet are not specifically touted as such. It is precisely for this reason that Freitag is such an important inclusion in this study.
Adbusters

The Vancouver-based Adbusters Media Foundation might be described as a highly media-savvy activist organisation. Specifically, however, it is renowned for—and indeed defined by—its advocacy of ‘culture jamming’ as a mode of political intervention. It publishes an eponymous magazine, Adbusters, the self-proclaimed ‘journal of the mental environment’, and is responsible for such ‘social marketing’ campaigns as ‘Buy Nothing Day’ and ‘TV Turn-off Week’. It is also responsible for establishing and organising the Culture Jammers Network, a “global network of artists, activists, writers, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to launch the new social activist movement of the information age” (Lasn 2000: 251); the organisation’s website is promoted as the ‘culture jammer’s headquarters’, thus as the epicentre of this network.

As a political tactic, culture jamming has little in common, per se, with the production of radical commodities. The work of the Media Foundation, however, is much more closely associable with the latter than the former. Adbusters magazine, for example, might promote culture jamming, but it is itself a commodity, as are the calendars, posters, postcards and books that the organisation also produces. Nevertheless, it is the organisation’s latest endeavour, namely Blackspot shoes, which is of the greatest significance to an analysis of radical commodities. The Blackspot venture is an ‘anti-corporation’ with (what is ostensibly) an ‘anti-brand’; the sneakers themselves are manufactured in a unionised Portuguese factory, from such materials as organic hemp, biodegradable rubber and recycled tyres, by workers whose rate of pay is above that country’s minimum wage (Arevalo 2005). Furthermore, the shoes feature a red dot on the toe, which is claimed to symbolise the ‘kicking of corporate ass’, particularly that of Phil Knight (founder and CEO of Nike) (see Walker 2004; Arevalo 2005). Thus, in the Blackspot sneaker venture, Adbusters’ critique of corporate hegemony is tangibly reconciled, in some measure, with its concerns as regards the ethical and ecological consequences of the consumer society. Yet, if there were any lingering doubts about the status as commodities of the organisation’s earlier products, there can be none as regards the Blackspot sneaker. This is, in a number of ways, an unconventional take on the commodity relation, particularly as compared to the contemporary paradigm thereof, but there can be no mistaking the fact that, for all of its pretensions to the contrary, the Blackspot sneaker reproduces the logic of the dominant order.

Culture jamming is defined, and discussed at greater theoretical length, in the section ‘Ironic consumption, culture jamming and the materialisation of radicalism’, in Chapter Nine. Furthermore, it is claimed that Adbusters magazine operates on a not-for-profit basis; whilst there is no apparent reason to doubt this claim, the magazine is a commodity nevertheless. The Blackspot venture subverts the standard corporate structure insofar as consumers are automatically shareholders; the purchase of one pair of shoes equates to one share in the ‘anti-corporation’. Whilst there is thus some foundation to the claim that its status is that of an ‘anti-corporation’, the claim that it is an ‘anti-brand’ is rather more problematic—see the section ‘Anti-brand brands’ and the impossibility of externality’ in Chapter Nine. Prior to the Blackspot sneaker, Adbusters had produced only cultural commodities (or meta-cultural commodities, if such a term might be permitted to describe commodified cultural critique). Doubts about the status as commodities of these earlier products would therefore be forgivable, since the commodified character of cultural products is frequently overlooked.
Thesis structure
What follows is an outline of the structure of this dissertation; an overview of the content of each chapter is provided.

Part I – For a Genealogy of the Radical Commodity
As explained above, the problem of the radical commodity is principally structural. Accordingly, the first part of my dissertation traces a genealogy of the radical commodity through the predominantly Marxist and post-Marxist canon that has been concerned with the analysis of the commodity-form. I trace not only the various theoretical obstructions which face the proposition that a radical politics might be expressed in the sphere of commodities, but also, correspondingly, the grounds upon which such a practice might be legitimated.

Chapter 1 – The Problem of the Commodity
The work of Karl Marx is the obvious point of departure for an analysis that is concerned with commodities and with the critique of capitalist structures—Marx’s work in this area is unmatched in importance. This chapter discusses the Marxian conception of the commodity, and so foregrounds the problematic which thereby arises with regard to the notion of a radical commodity.

Chapter 2 – Toward the Possibility of a Non-invidious Commodity
The principal shortcoming of Marx’s work on the commodity lies in the fact that his analysis is, as Gerry Gill (1984: 87) has observed, “blind to the cultural meanings, the symbolic significance of objects, and the ritual elements” of their exchange. Accordingly, this chapter is concerned with establishing a perspective of consumption as use, i.e., a perspective of the uses to which commodity-objects are put. We find in the work of Thorstein Veblen a seminal example of such an analysis; Veblen’s notion of ‘conspicuous consumption’ describes a whole world of practices which are markedly removed from the question of the commodity-structure. Furthermore, a small historical leap to the work of Michel de Certeau reveals an explicitly political analogue of conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, de Certeau’s work is of great significance to the question of radical commodities.

Chapter 3 – The Commodity as a Signifier of Lost Relationships
Veblen’s notion of ‘conspicuous consumption’ acutely anticipates the semiological analysis of commodities, and it is this to which we turn in Chapter Three. This chapter discusses pivotal concepts from Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics. The focus here, however, lies principally with the work of Roland Barthes, who introduced Saussurean concepts to the analysis of the world of objects, and with that of Jean Baudrillard. In effect, this chapter explicates the rise of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in the theorisation of the commodity. Baudrillard’s work, however, reconciles the Marxian analysis of the commodity-structure with the semiological focus of Barthes, and so offers an analysis of the structure of the consumer society.
Chapter 4 – The Commodity as an Ideological Object
Baudrillard’s work also brings to the fore the question of ideology in late-capitalist society; Chapter Four accordingly pursues this matter. We see in Baudrillard’s work an extension of Marx’s critical project, which turns, before long, to the critique of the work of Marx himself—specifically, Baudrillard refutes Marx’s assumption of the irreducibility of use-value. This line of reasoning leads, in my estimation, to Baudrillard’s formulation of the concept of ‘simulation’. The notion of simulation, however, is an understanding of social which dramatically complicates not only the idea of a radical commodity, but the very idea of a radical politics itself.

Chapter 5 – The Question of the Political
This chapter is concerned with relocating the possibility of the political in relation to Baudrillard’s concept of simulation. In the notion of hegemony posited by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, we find an explication of the political which is not only compatible with the notion of simulation, but which explicitly negotiates the Marxian problematic that had previously been foregrounded in Baudrillard’s work.

Chapter 6 – Toward a Politics of the Radical Commodity
The notion of the hegemonic form of politics proffered by Laclau and Mouffe is also particularly relevant to the question of radical commodities, insofar as it is admitting of the sphere of commodities as a possible site of struggle. There remains, however, the question of the direction in which such a politics might proceed. Accordingly, Chapter Six draws out and critiques the very different strategies proposed by Baudrillard and by Laclau and Mouffe. This chapter also draws together the work of the genealogy as a whole and I argue, in relation to this, that there is indeed scope for the expression of a radical politics in the world of commodities, in spite of the inherent paradox of such a practice.

Part II – For a Politics of the Radical Commodity
This component of my dissertation extends the discussions of the genealogical chapters in relation to empirical analyses of radical commodities—specifically, analyses which are centred on the six cases described above.

Chapter 7 – Delineating the Radical Commodity
In Chapter Seven, I describe, in more detail, the paradox of radical commodities as it may be discerned through empirical analysis. To be precise, I contemplate the contradictions which become apparent through such analysis, and also define and discuss different varieties of radical commodity.

Chapter 8 – Revolution™: Radical Commodities and Branding
This chapter discusses the phenomenon of radical commodities in relation to the institution of branding. It quickly becomes clear, through an examination of its development, that the institution of branding is, in many regards, an extension of the commodity-form. For this reason, it might be assumed that the branding of radical commodities would only exacerbate their contradictory nature. I argue, however, that
the rise of branding represents a change in the capitalist system which is in fact fundamental to the possibility of radical commodities.

Chapter 9 – The Thin Line: Radical Commodities and Incorporation

Chapter Nine is concerned with the question of incorporation as it pertains to radical commodities. Different forms of incorporation are discussed, as is the more fundamental question of the relationship between the idea of revolution and the logic of the consumer society. I argue that the materialisation of radicalism—i.e., some measure of ‘ethical’ or otherwise substantively radical practice—is pivotal in terms of the sustainability of radical commodities as such. Moreover, I argue that those processes which have been conventionally understood, in relation to radical political practices, as ‘incorporation’, might in fact be leveraged to radical effect, and that, in this way, radical commodities may stand to effect lasting change.

Summary

As has been stated, the problem of radical commodities issues largely from the question of the commodity-structure. It is therefore the question of the commodity-structure with which this dissertation is principally concerned. Accordingly, Marx’s seminal writings on the commodity are our starting point, yet, while Marx’s work constitutes the foundation of an understanding of the commodity-structure, it also poses the central problematic that we must address: the commodity-form is, in the Marxian view, a mechanism of exploitation. It is chiefly on account of this apparently exploitative character of the commodity that the notion of a radical commodity appears to be contradictory.

As a counterpoint to the Marxian critique, Veblen’s analysis of the significance of consumption as use is of pivotal importance. Whilst Veblen is principally interested in conspicuous consumption—a thoroughly competitive practice—his analysis also admits the possibility of a non-invidious commodity. And, if a non-invidious commodity is possible, then so too might a radical commodity be possible. Baudrillard, however, shows that the significatory capacity of commodity-objects is by no means distinct from the structural ills of the commodity-form. Rather, the commodity as signifier would appear to be no less injurious than the commodity as exchange-value. The analyses of Barthes and Baudrillard reveal the extent to which the commodity-structure is embedded in the capitalist ideology. In particular, Baudrillard argues that needs, which might otherwise be understood as irreducible, are themselves a product of the structure of the commodity. The extension of this line of reasoning destabilises any number of truths which might have served as a foundation for a radical politics and for an analysis of the political potential of commodities. The upshot of these developments: politics itself is called into question, and the notion of a radical commodity seems less and less plausible.

Baudrillard’s position, however, is not without problems of its own. Whilst he preserves, in the notion of ‘the symbolic’, something of a radical potentiality and thus some semblance of the political, Baudrillard’s proposals in this regard are tenuous. In
contrast, in the work of Zizek, we find a detailed analysis of the elementary operations of ideology; this has a complement in the conception of hegemony proffered by Laclau and Mouffe. In relation to the work of Zizek and of Laclau and Mouffe, it becomes possible to delineate a conception of the political which is consistent with the Baudrillardian contestation of Truth, yet which avoids the impasse that is inevitable if the Baudrillardian path should be pursued too far. I must, however, point out: the fact that the writings of Zizek and of Laclau and Mouffe are the last points of reference in Part I should not be taken to mean that I agree wholly and uncritically with these writers. Their perspectives are instrumental insofar as they enable us to circumvent the problematic which emerges in Baudrillard’s work, and also to recognise the radical potential of commodities, yet their extended political programmes are certainly contestable—particularly the proposal of radical democracy as a programme for the reform of the social (see Trend 1996: 15–16).

Whilst I seek to establish, in Part I, the theoretical possibility of radical commodities, I turn, in Part II, to empirical analyses of such objects. It is seen that, while the problem of radical commodities might principally concern the question of the commodity-structure, there are nevertheless many complications pertaining to radical commodities which only become apparent through an examination of real-world instances thereof. These complications include, for example, censorship at the hands of publishers and castigation at the hands of critics. It becomes clear, however, that something of an interplay exists between radical commodities, mass-cultural institutions and the contemporary logic of the commodity-form. Specifically, I argue that the institution of branding in fact facilitates, in some measure, the expression of a radical politics in the realm of commodities, yet radical commodities also stand to be incorporated into the dominant order by way of the mechanisms of branding. Conversely, the very idea of Revolution may be incorporated in the dominant order, yet, with regard to radical commodities, so too might processes typically understood as incorporative represent a means of effecting change.

In sum, we might understand not only that the sphere of commodities is a possible site for the expression or materialisation of a radical politics, but also that, given the contemporary ubiquity of the commodity, a conception of the possibility of radical commodities is in fact necessary.
Part I – For a Genealogy of the Radical Commodity
Chapter 1 – The Problem of the Commodity

1. The Problem of the Commodity

As stated in my Introduction, a rigorous critique of radical commodities should have as its foundation a detailed understanding of the commodity-form. As has also been stated, the critical analysis of the commodity-form finds its earliest significant proponent—and, without doubt, its most influential figure—in Karl Marx.

In the first chapter of the first volume of his magnum opus, *Capital* (Marx 1976a: 125–177), Marx expounds a conception of the commodity which those who would write subsequently on the matter could hardly ignore. As Slavoj Zizek has observed, the Marxian analysis of the commodity-form has “fascinated generations of philosophers, sociologists, art historians, and others” (1989: 16). Yet, Marx’s analysis is pertinent here not only by virtue of the seminal contribution that it makes to an understanding of the structure of the commodity; embedded in the Marxian analysis of the commodity-form is also a condemnation thereof, specifically, a condemnation which would theoretically foreclose any possibility of executing a radical politics by commodified means. Marx’s work therefore represents, for more than one reason, an obvious point of analytic departure, and so I shall, in this chapter, delineate the Marxian analysis of the commodity-form and his criticisms thereof.

The dualistic commodity

The commodity is firstly, for Marx (as for others), a thing that may be valued in both qualitative and quantitative terms. As regards the former, the commodity holds ‘*use-value*’; that is to say, the commodity is a useful thing, “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (Marx 1976a: 125). In contrast, in quantitative terms, the commodity holds ‘*exchange-value*’; in this way, it is an object that may be exchanged for other objects, or, rather, it is a manifestation of “the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind” (Marx 1976a: 126). Yet, we must ask: how might qualitatively different objects be exchanged for one another in a quantitative relation? That is, how might a coat, for example, be fairly exchanged for a quantity of flour? How might one justly determine the quantity of flour that should be equivalent in worth to the said coat? Whilst this question has today become buried beneath received practice and ‘common-sense’ understandings, it is just such a conundrum (and the implications thereof) with which much of Marx’s thinking on the

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1 It should be noted that this basic distinction is not attributable to Marx. Adam Smith, for example, in *The Wealth of Nations* (which was originally published some 90 years before *Capital*), discusses the value of goods, and states: “The word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called ‘value in use’; the other, ‘value in exchange’” (Smith 1982: 131). Yet, beyond such a recognition of the fact that this distinction was priorly established in the field of political economy, we shall concern ourselves here solely with the Marxian conceptions of use-value and exchange-value, since Marx’s critique of the structure of the commodity begins to take shape even in his understanding of these elementary terms.
commodity is concerned. The elementary problem is namely this: “exchange-value appears to be something accidental and purely relative, and consequently … an exchange-value that is inseparably connected with the commodity, inherent in it, seems a contradiction in terms” (Marx 1976a: 126).

Marx endeavours to overcome this problematic through an appeal to a ‘third thing’ that is present in both the commodity as use-value and the commodity as exchange-value, namely human labour. Yet, as the commodity carries both use-value and exchange-value, so too does Marx distinguish between two types of human labour: qualitative labour—that which he defines as “useful labour”—whose product is use-value, and human labour in the abstract, the qualitative disparity of which is dissolved, which is measured only quantitatively, that is, by its duration, and whose product is that which Marx simply—yet untidily—entitles “value” (Marx 1976a: 131–137). Thus, the commodity-object as use-value—as a thing which satisfies human needs, and which comes into being through the application of human labour to naturally occurring substances—also has ‘value’ not because of that useful labour which brought it into being as use-value, but rather because that labour also counts, quantitatively, as ‘value-forming substance’. Or, in other words, a useful commodity-object has ‘value’ “only because abstract human labour is objectified or materialized in it” (Marx 1976a: 129). Thus, the commodity’s exchange-value is not at all related to its usefulness; rather, in Marx’s view, the commodity’s exchange-value derives solely from—and in direct proportion to—its value, that is, from the duration of abstract human labour that is ‘congealed’ in it.

In order to better appreciate Marx’s understanding of the commodity, it is worth considering, briefly, some of his other thoughts as regards the relationship between the commodity as use-value and the commodity as exchange-value. Also noteworthy are his meditations on the respective qualities and constitutive conditions of both use-value and exchange-value. Firstly, of central concern to Marx is the condition of the commodity as an object, in two significant senses of that word: at once as regards its status as a material thing, but also as regards its consequent opposition to the labouring human subject, as an other which faces the subject. He minds to elucidate that the usefulness of a thing “does not dangle in mid-air” (Marx 1976a: 126), that an object’s usefulness is grounded in its physical properties, but also, more pertinently, that it is this physicality qua use-value which is the bearer of exchange-value. For Marx, however, an object may be a use-value without being a value—that is, without being a commodity—as in the case of useful things which are naturally occurring and

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Marx understands the concepts of ‘value’, ‘use-value’ and ‘exchange-value’ as, or uses these terms to describe, alternately: phenomena in the universal sense, commodity-objects when assessed according to a particular perspective, or discrete attributes of commodity-objects. Therefore, ‘value’ is the quantitative measure of human labour, or a commodity-object is a ‘value’ insofar as it is the congealed manifestation of quantitative human labour, or a commodity-object carries a discrete ‘value’ insofar as the object is the manifestation of a certain number of hours of human labour. Although such usage admittedly risks causing confusion, I shall also employ the terms ‘value’, ‘use-value’ and ‘exchange-value’ similarly—that is, in alternate senses—because such usage facilitates both a more comprehensive discussion of the concepts at hand and the avoidance of unnecessary wordiness.
which are thus not a product of human labour, such as air (Marx 1976a: 131). But so
too can a thing be a use-value and a product of human labour without being a
commodity: “[h]e who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour
admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities” (Marx 1976a: 131). In order to
constitute a commodity, Marx stipulates that a thing must not only be the product of
human labour and a use-value, but also a use-value for others, and still then it
becomes a commodity only through the act of exchange (Marx 1976a: 131).
Conversely, however, “nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the
thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour,
and therefore creates no value” (Marx 1976a: 131).

The problematic of socially necessary labour
Marx’s conception of the commodity presents itself, at first, as generally reasonable.
However, there is one strikingly problematic element therein, which I should
presently like to draw attention to, namely: if a commodity’s value—and thus, by
extension, its exchange-value—is quantitatively determined by the discrete duration
of labour-time congealed in it, how is one to establish the nature of this thing which is
supposed to constitute ‘abstract’ or ‘universal’ human labour? Even if one discounts
the qualitative differences of labour (that is, the worth of differing types of ‘useful
labour’, such as tailoring, farming, etc.), how does one account for the disparate skill-
and productivity-levels of different labourers? Marx (all-too-neatly) addresses this
fundamental complication, positing that:

The total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of
commodities, counts here as one homogeneous mass of human labour-power, although
composed of innumerable individual units of labour-power. Each of these units is the
same as any other, to the extent that it has the character of a socially average unit of
labour-power and acts as such, i.e. only needs, in order to produce a commodity, the
labour time which is necessary on an average, or in other words is socially necessary.
Socially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value
under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average
degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society. (Marx 1976a: 129)

The shortcoming of this explanation, however, is that Marx assumes that a discrete
unit of socially necessary labour may indeed be justly calculated for qualitatively
different types of labour and for infinitely diverse individual labourers. He offers a
specific illustration of this notion:

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3 Adam Smith makes a similar observation: “The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in
exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing
is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarce anything; scarce anything can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the
contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it” (Smith

4 This latter point, it should be noted, touches upon a topic to which we shall later return, namely the so-called ‘manufacture of
needs’.
The introduction of power-looms into England, for example, probably reduced by one half the labour required to convert a given quantity of yarn into woven fabric. In order to do this, the English hand-loom weaver in fact needed the same amount of labour-time as before; but the product of his individual hour of labour now only represented half an hour of socially necessary labour, and consequently fell to one half its former value. (Marx 1976a: 129, my emphasis)

In proffering such an example, Marx conveniently foregrounds the practical impossibility of establishing an objectively fair model of socially necessary labour, for how might one defend one’s conception of that which is ‘socially necessary’? It is incongruous that an otherwise highly formulaic critique of political economy should have at its foundation a theory of labour that relies upon conjecture, upon claims that one use-value probably requires more labour-time to produce than another, that $x$ hours of one type of useful labour probably equate to $y$ hours of another type.

Thus, Marx’s attempts here to determine a just measure of labour have at their centre a fundamental flaw. That is, his notionally mathematical aggregation and subsequent division of the sum total of societal labour-power is focussed exclusively upon that definitively quantitative ‘value-producing’ labour which determines exchange-value—and rightly so, for he properly recognises elsewhere (Marx 1976a: 127) that the products of qualitatively dissimilar labour, when recognised only as such, cannot confront one another with the neutrality required for exchange. However, this quantification is, by his own admission, merely an abstraction of useful labour, and indeed an undesirable one at that, for he deems that an emphasis upon exchange-values constitutes a “cheapening of commodities” (Marx 1976a: 487). It is therefore with the qualities of commodity-objects, i.e., with their use-value, their capacity to fulfil human needs, that his sentiments lie. But, thus evident is the inherent problematic of Marx’s attempt to account for ‘socially necessary’ labour: labour of the abstract and value-producing variety, which Marx seeks to aggregate and justly quantify, is definitively not, according to his own definition, ‘socially necessary’.

Marx is in fact seeking here to quantify not socially necessary labour but rather social needs, an endeavour that is, again by his own definition, inherently and irreconcilably contradictory. To wit, the notion that one may be able to determine what constitutes socially necessary labour is founded upon the assumption that one has knowledge of what constitutes social needs. It would appear that, for Marx, this latter knowledge is self-evident; it is likely for this reason that he seems so confident that a just measure of human labour may be settled upon. Yet, on the very first page of Capital proper, immediately following his above-quoted account of the commodity as ‘a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind’, he posits that “[t]he nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference” (Marx 1976a: 125). It seems reasonable to assume that the needs of the imagination would differ markedly from those of the stomach; if the former, which one might suspect to be relatively fickle and ephemeral, or, at any rate, exceedingly difficult to ascertain, count as valid among those needs that are to be
satisfied by commodities, in contrast with the apparently more concrete requirements of subsistence, one wonders: how is it that Marx really supposes to determine the quantity of qualitatively diverse types of labour that society requires? If he could see the contemporary, consumerist state of capitalism, complete with its constituent institution of advertising, it is likely that Marx would reconsider his sympathy for ‘needs of the imagination’.

**Toward a tripartite commodity: the fetishism of commodities**

Marx’s analysis of the commodity—particularly his analysis thereof in *Capital*—tends to privilege the strictly economic consequence of commodities over their extra-economic significance. Nevertheless, he makes a seminal contribution to the analysis of the wider social consequence of commodity exchange. Marx’s thoughts on the curious nature of the structural implications of the commodity-form comprise his notion of the “Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret” (*Marx 1976a*: 163–177). As is evidenced by the term itself, however, Marx’s attempts to comprehend the ‘fetishism’ of the world of commodities are founded upon and abound with theological metaphor. His thesis here is thus an evident anomaly in *Capital*; the notion of the fetishism of commodities is an appeal to a pre-modern episteme within a volume where an analytic, modernist method of rational equivalence otherwise prevails. Moreover, it is somewhat ironic that Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism is perhaps the most lastingly significant of all his writings on the commodity.

Marx prefaces his contemplation of the curious social character of commodities with the observation that whilst a commodity “appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing … its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (*Marx 1976a*: 163). According to Marx, these ‘metaphysical subtleties’ do not arise from an object’s quality as use-value, or from the fact that the materials of nature are transformed into a use-value by way of human labour. That is to say, an object which is a use-value, or which is indeed both a use-value and the product of human labour, but which is not a commodity (as in the circumstance where one satisfies one’s own need with the product of one’s own labour), is, in Marx’s view, devoid of mystery. Rather, the ‘mystical character’ of the commodity arises from the commodity-form itself. It therefore arises from that very act—that social act—through which an object emerges as a commodity, namely exchange. Commodities are the positive manifestations not merely of human labour (insofar as a discrete duration of universal human labour time is congealed in a commodity, in the form of the magnitude of the latter’s value), but also of human relationships, of the social relationships that revolve around and stem

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5 Moreover, Baudrillard takes issue with Marx’s use of the word ‘fetishism’ on the grounds that the term is “dangerous not only because it short-circuits analysis, but because since the 18th century it has conducted the whole repertoire of occidental Christian and humanist ideology” (1981: 88). Accordingly, the question of the relation between ideology and fetishism is one to which we will return.
from labour, which precisely constitute the relations of exchange. The mystery of the commodity that confronts Marx therefore arises from the fact that “the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour” (Marx 1976a: 164). It is worthwhile here to quote Marx at length:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. … It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. (Marx 1976a: 165).

Yet, as intimated above, it is through an appeal to the ‘misty realm of religion’ that Marx finds what is perhaps his most compelling explanation of the social consequence of commodities:

[In the realm of religion] the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx 1976a: 165).

Thus, not merely is the commodity-object a use-value, insofar as it is an object that fulfils human needs (that is, a product of the qualitative character of labour), and a value (thus an exchange-value), insofar as it is a concrete manifestation of human labour-time (a product of the quantitative character of labour), but so too is it a ‘fetishised’ object. It becomes so by virtue of the fact that it is a material reflection of human relationships, i.e., a product of the social character of labour. It is, however, purely from the latter—that is, from the social character of labour—that the fetishism of the commodity arises.

The above passages raise a number of matters worthy of discussion, yet the vital significance of Marx’s conception of the fetish character of the commodity may be understood as simply twofold: we may recognise these consequences as reification and systematisation. As regards reification, the following may be said: where one finds material things to be fundamental to certain social relations, such as where the commodity is the focus of relations between individual producers within capitalist societies, one also comes to find those social relations reflected in the material objects—thus the social characteristics of labour come to appear as objective characteristics of the commodity-objects themselves. That is to say, the social relations between the private labours of individuals appear not as “direct social
relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx 1976a: 166, my emphasis). In sum, by virtue of the pivotal role that commodity-objects play in social relations between persons, the sociality of humankind stands to become disembodied, and to take the form of a reified sociality of commodity-objects themselves.

The systematisation of commodities, meanwhile, emerges in the same moment as their reified sociality; whilst the former may initially appear as a consequence of the latter, the two phenomena are in fact reciprocally organising. On the one hand, commodity-objects are intrinsically systematised by virtue of the relationship that exists between one person’s labour and the aggregate labour of society: this social characteristic of labour, when manifest in a commodity-object, comes to appear as a systematic relationship between any one commodity and all other commodities, thus between one commodity and any other. On the other hand, a certain systematicity apparently inheres in the commodity-form itself, a result of the logic of equivalence which underlies this mode of exchange. Thus, when human relations become acutely manifest in objects by virtue of the fetishisation of commodities, all persons vicariously come by default into a relation with all others. Marx obliquely refers to the systematisation of commodities in the early stages of his discussion of commodity fetishism, positing that a commodity-object never stands on its own, but rather that it always stands “in relation to all other commodities” (Marx 1976a: 163). This systematicity of commodities, as will be seen, is a leitmotif among many subsequent analyses of the commodity (esp. Baudrillard 1996).

The consequence, of course, of this reified and systematised sociality of the commodity is that, in a manner unseen among the objects of archaic modes of exchange, imagined conversations between material things apparently come to supersede those ‘genuine’ social relations which they should otherwise merely supplement or reflect. That is to say, the reflection comes to transcend the original: social relations between commodity-objects come to be understood as the genuine article, indeed as the ne plus ultra of social relations. Moreover, to add insult to proverbial injury, the fetish character of commodities is not merely a coincidental or occasional consequence of the commodity-form; rather, this fetishism “attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (1976a: 165, my emphasis).

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6 In this vein, Marx and Engels posit that “[i]n bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality” (1971: 47).

7 Of course, we have here something of a circularity of cause and effect: any one commodity is drawn into a relationship with all other commodities by reason of the sociality of persons, but any one person is drawn into a relationship with all others by reason of the equivalence of commodities. This circular logic, however, is not necessarily so problematic as it may at first appear; indeed, as will be seen, such a circularity is to be found also in the structure of signification.
The Front Line is Everywhere: For a Critique of Radical Commodities

The radicalism of the commodity-form
The observation that fetishism is effectively inseparable from the commodity-form serves to preface another matter of great significance, namely Marx’s view of the consequence of the commodity-form as regards social change—the task at hand is, after all, a genealogy of the radical commodity. If it is understood that the word ‘radical’ refers to that which affects the basic nature of something, thus to that which, in terms of social change, espouses or effects social changes of a sweeping or extreme nature, then the commodity as perceived by Marx is certainly ‘radical’. Specifically, Marx observes that earlier social formations are inevitably dissolved by the rise of capitalism and the commodity. He states that “[p]atriarchal as well as ancient conditions (feudal, also) … disintegrate with the development of commerce, of luxury, of money, of exchange value, while modern society arises and grows in the same measure” (Marx 1973: 158).

Of course, society is, if nothing else, characterised by change. Thus, as a revolution in the social order, the rise of the bourgeoisie—that is, the establishment of the capitalist regime—is not unique. What is of significance, however, is the fact that, in the Marxian view, the capitalist order is unlike any which preceded it. Marx would contend that society is characterised not only by change, but also by conflict: in the Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx and Engels observe that “whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other” (1971: 53). Be this as it may, the age of capitalism is, in the Marxian view, distinguished by the character of this exploitation: “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (Marx and Engels 1971: 35). Under capitalism, in other words, the lot of the worker reaches, for Marx, its nadir. This analysis is further evident in his pre-Capital empirical writings on the effects of British colonialism. The most condemning of these are perhaps two New York Daily Tribune articles of 1853, ‘The British Rule in India’ and ‘The Government of India’, in the former of which he writes, in reference to the impact, upon Indian culture and society, of the system of rule imposed by British colonial capitalists, that “the misery inflicted by the British on Hindustan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindustan had to suffer before” (Marx and Engels: 33).

The ubiquitous commodity and the commodified subject
It is clear that Marx perceives the rise of capitalism to have fundamentally altered the nature of human relations and social organisation, and indeed largely to negative effect. Yet, it is necessary to recognise that it is the commodity-form which is the true object of his disapproval. Even in an account of the circumstances of its development, his disparaging view of commodity exchange is manifest:

the exchange of commodities originates not within the primitive communities, but where they end, on their borders at the few points where they come in contact with
other communities. That is where barter begins, and from here it strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it. (Marx 1970: 50, my emphasis)

This passage is also cited by Lukács, who, in response, remarks that this “observation about the disintegrating effect of a commodity exchange directed in upon itself clearly shows the qualitative change engendered by the dominance of commodities” (Lukács 1971: 85, my emphasis). Specifically, however, this ‘qualitative change’ of which Lukács speaks is attributable to the fetishism of the commodity; it is by way of its fetish character that the commodity begets, in the Marxian analysis, misery of an ‘infinitely more intensive kind’. Thus, in order to properly understand Marx’s censure of capitalism, we need to better understand the fetishism of the commodity.

When discussing the structure of the exchange of objects, one might overlook the fact that it is not the realm of objects alone upon which the logic of the commodity acts. That is to say, there is necessarily a particular variety of subjectivity that corresponds to the world of commodified objects. And here lies the true significance of Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism: it brings to the analytic fore the fact that the ramifications of the commodity-form are not merely objective but also subjective. The commodity-form, in other words, affects not merely objects, but also persons. This is the fundamental consequence of the proliferation of commodity exchange, namely the reification of the commodity-form. Marx saw that human labour-power is quantified and materialised as the value (thus as the exchange-value) of commodities, and also that social relations between labouring individuals come to appear as a sociality of the products of their labour, i.e., as a sociality of commodity-objects. Correspondingly, however, he also observed—that somewhat understatedly, in this example, which we find in a footnote—that “[t]he capitalist epoch is … characterized by the fact that labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property” (1976a: 274n). Thus, persons are alienated from their own capacity to labour. After Marx, Lukács observes that “a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something … estranged from himself” (1971: 87). Or, in other words,

The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of ‘ghostly objectivity’ cannot … content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world. (1971: 100)

Thus, whilst we see in commodity exchange an apparent humanisation of objects, insofar as they appear socialised, so too arises the corollary thereof, namely an objectification of the fundamental qualities of humanity. “The person objectifies himself in production, the thing subjectifies itself in consumption” (Marx 1976b: 16).⁸

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⁸ Needless to say, this is merely a transformation in the metaphorical sense; the person of course does not become an object, nor the object a person. What results is a reified objectivity of the person and a reified subjectivity of the object.
Expanding upon Marx’s mention of ‘primitive’ communities, the development of the commodity-form, to the point of its reification, may thus be illustrated: if commodity exchange existed only on the periphery of a community, the production of objects would typically remain motivated by the simple creation of use-values—a crop would be sown, tended and harvested purely to produce the food that sustains life, and that food would only be traded for another people’s produce if it was in surplus, and still then only so as to obtain other use-values that might be otherwise scarce or unobtainable. As such exchanges become increasingly commonplace, however, and certain equivalencies become accepted and repeated, so arise the first commodities; thereafter, the qualitative labour that produced those goods which are traded becomes appreciable in quantitative terms. That is, labour would become appreciable not merely in terms of its capacity to create use-value, but also in terms of its product’s worth in the context of exchange—thus, that labour would become appreciable in terms of its capacity to create exchange-value. And, as commodity exchange ‘strikes back into the interior of the community’, each worker ever increasingly sees his or her own labour in this quantitative way, that is, not for the use-value it may yield, but rather for the exchange-value it may yield. Yet, since a labour that creates objects which are exchange-values is itself an exchange-value, the worker’s labour is thus not merely quantified but also objectified; part of the worker’s self becomes a commodity, a reified object apparently residing in the person that is destined to disposal through exchange. In this way, as Marx and Engels observe, the commodity-form “has resolved personal worth into exchange value” (1971: 35). This is the ‘qualitative change’ of which Lukács spoke.

Furthermore, this qualitative change, in its full effect, is the outcome of the dominance of commodities. That is to say, this reification of the logic of the commodity represents the maturity of the commodity-form. Concluding the above-cited footnote, Marx states that “it is only from this moment [when the worker’s labour-power becomes objectified in his own eyes] that the commodity-form of the products of labour becomes universal” (1976a: 274n). Accordingly, it may be understood that the consequence of the commodity-form differs depending upon the extent to which it is entrenched; in a social formation wherein the commodity-form is present merely as a peripheral mode of exchange, its effect upon the subject is correspondingly less thorough than in a social formation wherein it has reached a state of dominance or ubiquity:

even when commodities have this impact on the internal structure of a society, this does not suffice to make them constitutive of that society. To achieve that it would be necessary … for the commodity structure to penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image. … Where the commodity is universal it manifests itself differently from the commodity as a particular, isolated, non-dominant phenomenon. … The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance…. Only then does the
commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created. (Lukács 1971: 85-86, my emphasis)

Therefore, in its nascent stages, when co-existent with other modes of exchange, commodity exchange would be correspondingly less-than-total in its effect. When the commodity-form becomes the dominant mode of a community’s relations with objects, however, so too does the logic of the commodity surreptitiously impose itself as a ‘second nature’ in the minds of all. That is to say, when the commodity-form becomes omnipresent, it gives rise not merely to a pervasive abstraction and quantification of objects; rather, it has corresponding effects upon the subject also, namely a thoroughgoing internalisation of the abstract logic of the commodity. When every object that he or she produces (or contributes to the production of, as is the case in social formations wherein labour is divided) is a commodity, the worker cannot help but view his or her own capacity for labour as a commodity.

We have thus seen that, as Baudrillard has observed, “[t]he concepts of commodity fetishism and money fetishism sketched, for Marx, the lived ideology of capitalist society—the mode of sanctification, fascination and psychological subjection by which individuals internalize the generalized system of exchange value” (1981: 88). Yet, on this note, we ought to reflect, briefly, upon the understanding of the commodity that has been heretofore established. The commodity-form is of course a social construct, an institution given impetus by persons. For example, Marx has observed that “the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language” (1976a: 167). The commodity mode of exchange, in other words, does not alter the nature of objects per se, i.e., their material existence; rather, it affects only our perception of them. The same of course applies to the commodity-form’s effect upon our conception of ourselves as subjects. And yet, in acknowledging that the reification of the commodity-form is, needless to say, a phenomenon that transpires entirely in the mind of the social subject, we should not assume that its consequence is in any way diminished. Certainly, to the reifying mind, this is nothing less than an incontrovertible reality. In sum, whilst critical analysis ostensibly affords some measure of detachment from the phenomenon of

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9 Moreover, the reciprocal effect, upon the subject, of the social organisation of objects—that is, of commodity exchange—is consistent with a fundamental principle of Marx’s historical materialism, namely that “[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness” (1976b: 3).
10 An ancient water vessel, for example, which, it might be assumed, would have been conceived and originally employed principally for its utility, remains physically unchanged, even at a molecular level, when it enters the contemporary market as a collectable commodity; “no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond” (Marx 1976a: 177). The water vessel’s present-day status as a sought-after curio is the result not of some change in the object’s physicality; rather, it results from the fact that we, in an epoch overrun by the logic of the commodity, relate to the same object in a manner that differs, fundamentally, from the way in which it would have been understood in its original historical context.
11 As regards this last point, we might consider Thorstein Veblen’s assertion, discussed in Chapter Two, that socially produced needs may be as ‘indispensable’ as any other (ostensibly more basal) needs, i.e., that such needs as ‘conspicuously wasteful honorific expenditure’ may ‘become more indispensable than much of that expenditure which ministers to the ‘lower’ wants of physical well-being or sustenance only’. 
reification, such that its effects may be denounced as disingenuous, as *ideological*, we should not lose sight of the fact that, by its very definition, it constitutes nothing less than reality for those that it touches.

On the topic of fetishism, I should lastly point out that it is not merely in the realm of work that the tendency toward the abstraction of the object is mirrored by an objectification of the subject. This is a matter that will be discussed in greater length in the coming chapters, but it ought to be raised here. Although Marx was concerned, first and foremost, with the plight of the proletariat, and specifically with the way in which the working class experienced new forms of subjugation as a result of the logic of the commodity, we should acknowledge that the effect of the commodity-form upon subjectivity is not limited to our capacity to labour. Rather, any number of fundamental human qualities might, and indeed *do*, adopt the form of a commodity, of something that we *possess*, of something *alienable*, i.e., which can be (both) bought and sold. Lukács observes that “[j]ust as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefuly and more definitively into the consciousness of man” (Lukács 1971: 93). This tendency toward abstraction and reification remains patently in force; we might understand that its contemporary extremes, respectively objective and subjective, are to be found in the futures market and in ‘lifestyle branding’. Indeed, whilst the radical effect of the commodity-form is most obvious in such cases as the British colonisation of India, its radical remaking of our relations with objects, our environment and ourselves recurs. That is to say, in spite of the fact that the colonialism typical of the nineteenth century is not so prevalent in the present day (if only by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of peoples have, by now, been drawn into the capitalist system), the encroachment of the commodity-form continues, almost unabated. Of course, the commodity’s assault is today less geographic in nature, yet it is at least as invasive as British colonialism, and perhaps more so; the encroachment of the commodity-form is contemporarily evident wherever its logic advances into new areas, as exemplified by the commodification of human reproduction, genetic code, our ‘mental environment’ (to quote *Adbusters*), and so on.

**Conclusion**

We have laid down, in this chapter, the foundation of an understanding of the structure of the commodity. By way of Marx’s seminal analyses, particularly that of commodity fetishism, and Lukács’s subsequent explication of the reification of the commodity-form, we have seen that the logic of the commodity reaches beyond the realm of objects, and affects even the subjective conception of the self. Moreover, we have witnessed Marx’s disapproval of this subjectivity which arises with commodity exchange. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, this latter point is of key significance; if the commodity-form is understood as fundamentally abominable, the notion of a radical commodity would be deeply problematic, to say the least (and the
notion of an ethical commodity, in particular, would be patently contradictory). In other words, however well-intentioned the production of a commodity might be, so long as it perpetuates the commodity-structure, it would inevitably also, in the Marxian view, reproduce the apparent offences of the capitalist order. This is, in many ways, a persuasive argument, and there are those who would hold such a view. Consider, for example, Pilar Arevalo’s reportage on the Blackspot sneaker:

[N]ot everyone is excited about Adbusters’ new commercial project. Luther Blisset, a Melbourne-based writer for activist media website Indymedia, is sceptical about any long-term benefits of the Blackspot sneaker because it bears too many contradictions. “Corporations exist to make money,” he says. “They can be as ethical as they want to up to a certain point where the actual profitability or viability of the project becomes a problem. These social relations that capitalism produces, you can’t escape them just by adding an ethical tag to your product….” (Arevalo 2005)

It might be understood that such an uncompromising refutation of the possibility of an activistic commodity issues from a thoroughgoing acceptance of the Marxian position, that is, from an acceptance at once of Marx’s analyses of capitalism and his underlying assumptions about the social. Blisset’s apparently unqualified support for the Marxian position, however, is one which I do not share. That is to say, whilst Marx’s critique of political economy is of inestimable importance, I would argue that the solution which he proposes to the problem that apparently inheres in capitalism is less compelling. The issue here is nothing other than the question of the philosophical foundation from which one’s analysis of commodity exchange might issue. This, of course, is a matter of great consequence; it is accordingly one of the principal concerns of these genealogical chapters.

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12 I should point out that, whilst I recognise that Marx’s politics runs subtly through his analyses of the commodity, I would argue that the two are not inseparable.
2. Toward the Possibility of a Non-invidious Commodity

Whilst Marx’s critique of political economy is of exceptional significance in terms of its contribution to a comprehension of the commodity-structure and the implications thereof, particularly with regard to the plight of the proletarian, his analyses of the consumption of commodity-objects are few and far between. Specifically, it might be understood that Marx fails to adequately appreciate the sociopolitical significance of practices of consumption, that is, the significance of objects in use. An appreciation of the logic of consumption, however, is absolutely essential to an understanding of the contemporary world of commodities, and thus also to an understanding of the phenomenon of radical commodities. For this reason, in pursuit of a perspective of the social significance of consumption practices, we must look beyond Marx’s oeuvre.

An early—yet enduringly relevant—analysis of consumption practices, and the political character thereof, is to be found in the seminal first text, of 1899, of the American theorist Thorstein Veblen. Although chiefly an economic study of the ‘leisure class’—the upper class(es) of society, so called on account of its members’ pecuniary superiority, whereby they are exempt from laborious employment and consequently lead a life characterised by leisure—Veblen’s The Theory of the Leisure Class (1953) is of considerable consequence by virtue of the fact that, in his analysis, “attention is perforce given to … features of social life that are not commonly classed as economic” (Veblen 1953: xx). Veblen’s text is thus particularly relevant to the present study: radical commodities belong at once to the realms of politics, economy and culture, and The Theory of the Leisure Class is a seminal and explicit formulation of the interrelationship between economic matters and other facets of social being that are not strictly or classically economic in nature. Moreover, we notably find in Veblen’s work not only an influential analysis of consumption, but also a perspective of commodity relations which differs fundamentally from that of Marx.

The honour of exploitation
In The Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen formulates two especially significant concepts, namely those of ‘pecuniary emulation’ and ‘conspicuous consumption’. Not merely of historical interest, these concepts almost perfectly describe the logic of capitalism in the First World today. To be precise, Veblen’s work is of particular relevance by virtue of the object of his study. It might be understood that the opposition which Marx perceived, in the late-nineteenth century, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat today describes the essential structure of global capitalism, specifically, the relationship between First-World and Third-World or ‘developing’ nations. The object of Veblen’s analysis, however, is not the working class or its plight, but rather the internal rivalry of the elite classes alone, that is, of the ‘leisure class’; the contemporary relevance of his work issues from the fact that the
particular mode of competition characteristic, in his analysis, of the leisure class, today prevails as the dominant logic of consumer capitalism in First-World nations.

So as to appreciate the full significance of Veblen’s ideas, it is worthwhile tracing their development in some detail. To do this, we must look at Veblen’s account of the historical roots of the leisure class, and of the development of the phenomena of pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption.

It is, firstly, the matter of occupation which is understood by Veblen as the distinction between classes. The leisure class is characterised, unsurprisingly, by its exemption from the toil of industrial employment:

In such communities [as feudal Europe or feudal Japan] the distinction between classes is very rigorously observed; and the feature of most striking economic significance in these class differences is the distinction maintained between the employments proper to the several classes. The upper classes are by custom exempt or excluded from industrial occupations, and are reserved for certain employments to which a degree of honor attaches. (Veblen 1953: 21)

The distinction between the honourable, non-industrial employments of the leisure class and the various ignoble employments has as its heritage, in Veblen’s view, the distinction between men’s and women’s work in the earlier or lower stages of ‘barbarian culture’:

In nearly all these tribes the women are, by prescriptive custom, held to those employments out of which the industrial occupations proper develop at the next advance. The men are exempt from these vulgar employments and are reserved for war, hunting, sports, and devout observances. A very nice discrimination is ordinarily shown in this matter. This division of labor coincides with the distinction between the working and the leisure class as it appears in the higher barbarian culture. … Virtually the whole range of industrial employments is an outgrowth of what is classed as women’s work in the primitive barbarian community. (Veblen 1953: 23)

It is important to note that the occupations characteristic of women in the ‘barbaric’ social formations, those ‘vulgar’ employments which are the antecedents of industrial labour, are precisely those which are concerned with material sustenance, with subsistence. In contrast, the apparently higher callings characteristic of men—those apparently honourable employments—are those wherein material benefit, if it is not patently absent, is at least markedly abstracted. This is the case with politics, warfare and religion.

The distinction between honourable and ignoble employment, between the occupations of the upper and the lower classes, is not determined per se by the respective heritage of each as men’s work and women’s work. Rather, Veblen posits that the institution of a leisure class emerges in concert with the transition from a peaceable social formation to a “consistently warlike habit of life” (Veblen 1953: 24). This warlike habit, this habit of competition, is central to a discrimination between employments, thus to a distinction between classes, because it renders habitual the
practice of *exploitation*. That is to say, in spite of the fact that it is the work characteristic of women—that which Veblen describes sympathetically as ‘productive labour’—which sustains the community, it is the work characteristic of men which attracts esteem, in Veblen’s estimation, *precisely because of its exploitative nature*. It is worthwhile quoting Veblen at length here:

The conditions apparently necessary to [the] emergence [of the leisure class] in a consistent form are: (1) the community must be of a predatory habit (war or the hunting of large game or both); that is to say, the men, who constitute the inchoate leisure class in these cases, must be habituated to the infliction of injury by force and stratagem; (2) subsistence must be obtainable on sufficiently easy terms to admit of the exemption of a considerable portion of the community from steady application to a routine of labor. The institution of a leisure class is the outgrowth of an early discrimination between employments, according to which some employments are worthy and others unworthy. Under this ancient distinction the worthy employments are those which may be classed as exploit; unworthy are those necessary everyday employments into which no appreciable element of exploit enters. This distinction has but little obvious significance in a modern industrial community … [b]ut it persists with great tenacity as a commonplace preconception even in modern life, as is shown, for instance, by our habitual aversion to menial employments. It is a distinction of a personal kind—of superiority and inferiority. (Veblen 1953: 24-25)

In short, the distinction between employments is typical of that which Veblen terms an ‘invidious’ distinction or comparison, which itself is namely “a process of valuation of persons in respect of worth” (Veblen 1953: 40).

Hence apparent is the true nature, according to Veblen, of the distinction between occupations: the evolution, as such, of an understood scale of the comparative regard of various employments, and also of the correlated distinction between social classes, is the product of neither an inherent desirability or worth of those employments nor their apparently gendered heritages, but rather it results from a comparison between inferiority and superiority, between subjection and exploit, between mere ‘industry’ and the “acquisition of substance by seizure” (Veblen 1953: 28). Specifically, Veblen states that “[i]ndustry is effort that goes to create a new thing, with a new purpose given it by the fashioning hand of its maker out of passive (‘brute’) material; while exploit, so far as it results in an outcome useful to the agent, is the conversion to his own ends of energies previously directed to some other end by another agent” (1953: 27–28) It is the latter alone which, in Veblen’s estimation, confers honour.

Thus it is clear that the distinction between employments, between the ignoble ‘drudgery’ of industry and the honour of exploit, is, in Veblen’s view, simply the upshot—perhaps unsurprisingly—of relations of power. Also clear, however, is the extent to which Veblen’s analysis differs from that of Marx. Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* is, at base, a sociology of exploitation. In contrast, so concerned was Marx with the mechanics of the exploitation of the proletariat at the hands of the
bourgeoisie that the question of the motives behind that exploitation never entered his purview. Yet, as has been intimated, it is not only in terms of the foci of their analyses that the two theorists differ. Rather, as we shall shortly see, the sociological and psychological assumptions which underlie Marx’s and Veblen’s respective analyses are fundamentally divergent.

**Emulation and the evidence of power**

Let us now begin to address the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ more specifically. Initially, we must examine the idea of ‘pecuniary emulation’, which underlies conspicuous consumption.

That habituation to ‘the infliction of injury by force and stratagem’—in other words, that “habitual bellicose frame of mind” (Veblen 1953: 32)—which, according to Veblen, is the product of a ‘consistently warlike habit of life’, is the first of perhaps two principal prerequisites of the phenomenon of pecuniary emulation.¹ The second is largely a consequence of the first, and is namely the institution of the private ownership of property, that is, the concept of a “conventional, equitable claim to extraneous things” (Veblen 1953: 34). Veblen attributes the heritage of this institution initially to the practice in lower barbarian cultures of seizing women from an enemy as trophies of conquest.² And, “[f]rom the ownership of women the concept of ownership extends itself to include the products of their industry, and so there arises the ownership of things as well as of persons” (Veblen 1953: 34).

By virtue of the combination of an ‘habitual bellicose frame of mind’ and the institution of private property, property itself becomes the object of competition. Specifically, Veblen posits that “[w]herever the institution of private property is found, even in a slightly developed form, the economic process bears the character of a struggle between men for the possession of goods” (1953: 34-35). Of course, in time, money becomes the object of this struggle, and so we arrive at Veblen’s concept of ‘pecuniary emulation’, which might be summarised thus: wealth, by virtue of a number of degrees of evolution and remove, comprises the evidential residue of exploit, of one’s efficient application to apparently honourable employ, and subsequently becomes itself the basis of esteem, i.e., the measure against which individuals are invidiously judged, and accordingly the object of competition.³ Or, in Veblen’s own words:

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¹ Strictly speaking, we should include a third here, namely a ready availability, or a sufficient excess, of the means of subsistence, such that the community may survive without the participation of all individuals in productive labour (this was discussed by Veblen in a passage quoted above). This is because pecuniary emulation is initially the reserve of the leisure class, yet there cannot be persons of leisure in a community where all are required to labour productively in order to ensure the group’s (and thus their own) survival.

² Of course, the seizure of women is itself an emulative practice insofar as it demonstrates prowess in that most honorific of occupations, warfare.

³ It should be noted that the habit of invidious comparison which is at the root of pecuniary emulation is itself attributable, in Veblen’s analysis, to an ‘instinct of workmanship’. “Wherever the circumstances or traditions of life lead to an habitual comparison of one person with another in point of efficiency, the instinct of workmanship works out in an emulative or invidious comparison of persons. … In any community where such an invidious comparison is habitually made, visible success becomes an end sought for its own utility as a basis of esteem. Esteem is gained and dispraise avoided by putting one’s efficiency in
Property set out with being booty held as trophies of the successful raid. … But so soon as the custom of individual ownership begins to gain consistency, the point of view taken in making the invidious comparison on which private property rests will begin to change. … Gradually, as industrial activity further displaces predatory activity in the community’s everyday life and in men’s habits of thought, accumulated property more and more replaces trophies of predatory exploit as the conventional exponent of prepotence and success. … The possession of wealth, which was at the outset valued simply as an evidence of efficiency, becomes, in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act. (Veblen 1953: 36-37)

Insofar as the possession of wealth in this way constitutes the basis of esteem, one might imagine that persons would be lead to be frugal, so as to maximise said wealth. Veblen observes, however, that such is not the case. Rather, he contends that the opposite is in fact true, for “[i]n order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (Veblen 1953: 42). It is precisely this need for the exhibition of one’s wealth or power which underlies the institutions of ‘conspicuous leisure’ and ‘conspicuous consumption’.

Let us firstly consider the former. Veblen posits that leisure is deemed honorific in early social formations by virtue of its characteristically exploitative nature, i.e., by virtue of the fact that a life of leisure is necessarily sustained through the exploitation of others’ industrious labour. In later social formations, however, leisure is esteemed simply because such a life of luxury is commonly recognisable as the reserve of the pecuniarily superior. Yet, leisure begets esteem only when it is conspicuous, for it is only through its visibility that it may be useful as the stuff of an invidious comparison. This quality of visibility is invariably fundamental to Veblen’s concept of emulation. For example, with regard to the effect of the demand for conspicuous leisure, he observes:

For some part of the time his life is perforce withdrawn from the public eye, and of this portion which is spent in private the gentleman of leisure should, for the sake of his good name, be able to give a convincing account. He should find some means of putting in evidence the leisure that is not spent in the sight of spectators. (Veblen 1953: 46)

Indeed, to this need for a ‘convincing account’ of that leisure time which would otherwise remain unseen, Veblen (1953: 47) attributes the emergence of the institution of good manners, insofar as many hours must be spent on one’s initiation into and perfection of a system of otherwise inane customs. He also attributes to this need the survival or prevalence of such branches of knowledge as of archaic languages, fashion, sports and the arts. Of course, it is not leisure time per se that such customs and knowledge put into evidence; rather, by reduction, such ‘inessential’ evidence. The result is that the instinct of workmanship works out in an emulative demonstration of force” (Veblen 1953: 29). Of course, in an emulative practice, what is put in evidence is not one’s own efficiency per se, but rather one’s efficacy in the exploitation of the efficiency of others.
knowledge evidences that which the non-industrious expenditure of time represents in turn, namely pecuniary might. In sum, the mere possession of wealth may well be notionally honourable, but it is in fact the visible expenditure thereof from which the esteem of others ensues in practice. Again, therefore, we see that evidence is fundamental to the notion of emulation; in the case of emulation of the pecuniary variety, it is namely wealth that must be put into evidence, so that an invidious comparison may be made.

In this way, we arrive at the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’. In spite of the fact that Veblen’s theory of the elite class is entitled a theory of the ‘leisure class’, and not a theory of the ‘consumptive class’, it is conspicuous consumption, and not conspicuous leisure, which prevails as the dominant means of demonstrating pecuniary strength. Whilst Veblen understands both methods to be more or less equivalent in terms of their efficacy within social formations wherein the community is small enough to be reached by “common notoriety” alone (Veblen 1953: 53), he posits that the institution of conspicuous consumption, over conspicuous leisure, rises to the fore within industrial and later social formations, on account of its being better disposed to ready conspicuity:

The means of communication and the mobility of the population now expose the individual to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging of his reputability than the display of goods … In order to impress these transient observers, … the signature of one’s pecuniary strength should be written in characters which he who runs may read. It is evident, therefore, that the present trend of the development is in the direction of heightening the utility of conspicuous consumption as compared with leisure. (Veblen 1953: 71–72)

This, of course, is a trend which remains in force today.

**Marx versus Veblen**

In Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption, we find a perspective of the social function of the world of commodities which differs radically from anything that we find in Marx. Of course, Veblen is explicitly concerned with the question of the extra-economic significance of consumption, whilst Marx’s engagement with this topic is, as has been suggested, cursory at best. However, as I have also mentioned, the dissimilarities between the two theorists’ analyses run much deeper than the difference in their foci. Specifically, their respective analyses are underlain by fundamentally competing perspectives of the social and of human behaviour. It is this underlying divergence which we must now contemplate, since it is of immeasurable consequence as regards the question of a radical or progressive politics in the context of capitalist society—of course, it is also of immeasurable consequence as regards the problem of radical commodities. I should, however, state, at the outset of this discussion, that this is a topic of no small magnitude, the exposition of which will accordingly unfold throughout the coming chapters, in parallel with our analysis of the commodity-form. It is intended, in other words, that the present discussion will
merely begin to make inroads upon the question of the theoretical foundation from which our understanding of the political legitimacy of radical commodities might issue.

As we have seen, Veblen contends that ‘wherever the institution of private property is found, even in a slightly developed form, the economic process bears the character of a struggle between men for the possession of goods’. He laments, however, that this struggle has been customarily construed within economic theory merely as a struggle for subsistence (during the earlier phases of industry) or as competition for an increase in the material comforts of life (during the more efficient, modern phases of industry). In contrast to such an analysis, Veblen contends that the motivation for the acquisition of goods truly lies not with a quest for survival or comfort, but rather with the emulative utility of accumulation:

The end of acquisition and accumulation is conventionally held to be the consumption of the goods accumulated…. This is at least felt to be the economically legitimate end of acquisition…. Such consumption may of course be conceived to serve the consumer’s physical wants—his [sic] physical comfort—or his so-called higher wants—spiritual, aesthetic, intellectual, or what not; the latter class of wants being served indirectly by an expenditure of goods, after the fashion familiar to all economic readers. But it is only when taken in a sense far removed from its naïve meaning that consumption of goods can be said to afford the incentive from which accumulation invariably proceeds. The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the development of all those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches. (Veblen 1953: 35)

Although there is no mention of Marx’s work in The Theory of the Leisure Class, it might be understood that Marx demonstrates something akin to that conventional naïveté of which Veblen speaks, specifically on account of Marx’s veneration of use-value. More significant than the two theorists’ contrasting positions regarding the consumption of goods, however, are the different assumptions which underlie these positions. In order to appreciate the distinction here, one must first understand the solution proposed by Marx to the ills of capitalism. Although Marx’s politics is present in an unspoken form throughout much of his critique of political economy, it is explicated nowhere so clearly as it is in the Manifesto of the Communist Party. He and Engels therein argue that “modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products, that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few” (1971: 46). On this note, their analysis is scarcely different to that of Veblen. Further to this analysis, however, Marx and Engels propose a solution to such exploitation. Specifically, they go on to explain that “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property” (Marx and Engels

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*For that matter, there is no mention of any theorist in Veblen’s work, which is to say that there is an absolute—and thus conspicuous—dearth of citations in The Theory of the Leisure Class.*
1971: 46). It should be pointed out that it is not the abolition of the institution of private property in general, but the abolition of the institution of bourgeois private property in particular, which is their objective, and yet, regardless, the end which would be sought by way of such an abolition is nothing other than the dissolution of all class divisions. It is in relation to this objective that the Marxian position differs fundamentally from that of Veblen.

To elaborate this point, it might be understood that Marx and Engels take antagonisms between classes to be the most fundamental of all social antagonisms—they state, for example, that “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (1971: 32). In turn, they contend that all class antagonisms coalesce, in modern society, into the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In their own words, they posit that “[o]ur epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses … this distinctive feature: it has simplifed the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (1971: 33). They presume, however, that this antagonism can be abolished, precisely by way of the abolition of the bourgeoisie itself, a development which would be achieved, in essence, by way of the abolition of the institution of bourgeois private property. In other words, if class conflict has been reduced, by historical circumstances, to a conflict between only two classes, and if one of these two classes is done away with, then so too is class conflict itself abolished. Again, in the authors’ own words:

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class. (Marx and Engels 1971: 55)

Thus, in sum, in spite of their observation that ‘one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other’, Marx and Engels presume the possibility, in modern society, of the abolition of class conflict and the exploitation which corresponds thereto. It is precisely in this way that the Marxian position differs, fundamentally, from that of Veblen.

Insofar as he conceives of the development of an ‘habitual’, and indeed deep-seated, ‘bellicose frame of mind’, Veblen’s analysis affords no such prospect of the abolition of class antagonisms. In fact, in terms of his underlying conception of human social behaviour, it might be supposed that Veblen is distinctly Nietzschean. Specifically, what lies at the heart of Veblen’s argument is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s notion of the ‘will to power’—Nietzsche has posited that “[e]xploitation” does not pertain to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it pertains to the essence of the
living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will of life” (Nietzsche 1977: 230). Needless to say, such an estimation of the human essence is thoroughly preclusive of any political endeavour which might seek to abolish the fundamental antagonisms of the social.

Of course, in Veblen as in Nietzsche, the assertion that an invidious or exploitative tendency is intrinsic to human nature represents a problem for theory. Suffice to say, such an exploitative tendency cannot be proven universal. And yet, Veblen’s observation of a fervently competitive tendency rings contemporarily true. Indeed, it would seem to accurately describe the ethos of capitalist societies today, in respect of both production and consumption, that is, in respect of the competition between companies in production, and between individuals in consumption. Moreover, since we have seen socialist and communist regimes not gain strength with time, but instead implode, or cede to the encroach of capitalism, one after another, the plausibility of the proletarian revolution as the solution to the antagonisms of the social is thrown into serious doubt.

As regards the question of radical commodities, the implications of this evidently momentous debate are principally twofold, yet these are also closely interrelated. These implications concern namely (1) the question of the objectives which might be sought by a radical political practice under capitalism, and thus by way of the production of radical commodities, and (2) the question of the legitimacy of the doing of radical political practice by commodified means, that is, the question of the legitimacy of radical commodities themselves. For example, if it is understood that the antagonisms of the social might be abolished by political means, specifically by way of the abolition of capitalist/bourgeois property relations, in accordance with the Marxist analysis, then the objectives of a radical political practice are quite clearly defined. Yet, in relation to such an analysis, the notion of a radical commodity is itself internally and fundamentally contradictory. Alternatively, if it is understood that the antagonisms of the social cannot be abolished, i.e., that they will arise regardless of material and political circumstances, then the way forward for a radical or progressive political practice is anything but clear. In relation to such an estimation, however, we might conclude that the structural consequences of the commodity-form upon the subject, as observed by Marx, are, if not desirable, at least unavoidable. Thus, the notion of a radical commodity is not inherently inconsistent, but is instead merely strategically complicated.

As I indicated above, I do not propose to pass judgement, at this point, as regards the problem broached here; what is important is that we can now move forward with this question in mind. Accordingly, let us now return to our discussion of Veblen’s work.

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5 With regard to the will to power, Nietzsche has also posited that “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation” (Nietzsche 1977: 229-230).
The utility of waste

In view of the difference between the perspectives of Marx and Veblen as regards their analyses of the world of goods, which might be reduced to the themes of utility and emulation respectively, there are likely few matters, if any, regarding which the two theorists’ positions would diverge more sharply than that of the question of waste. The Marxian conception of waste would consist of precisely what one would expect of the term; in Veblen’s analysis, however, waste takes on rather a different significance.

To return to the matters of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption, it might be noted that both are simply alternate varieties of—in Veblen’s own words—“conspicuous waste” (Veblen 1953: 73); the former is the waste of time, the latter of goods. Such overt squandering is, in Veblen’s estimation, and as elucidated above, a means of demonstrating pecuniary excess or strength, and is hence a means of garnering repute. Regarding conspicuous expenditure, Veblen remarks that “[i]n order to be reputable it must be wasteful” (Veblen 1953: 77) and it logically follows that, in the interests of heightening one’s reputation, the more waste the better. It should be noted, however, that Veblen’s use of the term ‘waste’ is not, at his own insistence, to be taken in a contemptuous sense, as a suggestion of illegitimate expenditure, but rather as an indicator of expenditure that, simply, “does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole” (Veblen 1953: 78).

Veblen posits that that expenditure which might be deemed wasteful according to such a definition—i.e., that expenditure which is not of holistic service to humankind—is nevertheless very far from wasteful as regards its utility to the individual who would participate in conspicuous expenditure:

> In strict accuracy nothing should be included under the head of conspicuous waste but such expenditure as is incurred on the ground of an invidious pecuniary comparison. But in order to bring any given item or element in under this head it is not necessary that it should be recognized as waste in this sense by the person incurring the expenditure. It frequently happens that an element of the standard of living which set out with being primarily wasteful, ends with becoming, in the apprehension of the consumer, a necessary of life; and it may in this way become as indispensable as any other item of the consumer’s habitual expenditure. … That is to say, the conspicuously wasteful honorific expenditure that confers spiritual well-being may become more indispensable than much of that expenditure which ministers to the ‘lower’ wants of physical well-being or sustenance only. (Veblen 1953: 79-81)

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6 Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter state, after Veblen, that “[t]he problem is that while an increase in ‘material’ goods can generate increased happiness for everyone, status is an intrinsically zero-sum game. In order for one person to win, someone else must lose. Moving up necessarily involves bumping someone else—or everyone else—down. So the time and effort invested in the production of prestige goods is, according to Veblen, ‘wasteful’. Veblen is careful to point out, however, that to call such expenditures wasteful ‘implies no depreciation of the motives or ends sought by the consumer’. The reason it is wasteful is that when everyone does it, everyone winds up right back where they started. Thus the expenditure of time and energy does not generate any improvements in ‘human well-being on the whole’” (Heath and Potter 2005: 116).
Veblen’s analysis here constitutes a very nice elucidation of those ‘needs of the imagination’ which, as I argued in the previous chapter, complicate the Marxian formulations of both use-value and value. (Admittedly, however, Veblen’s elucidation of the needs of the imagination remains rather one-dimensional, insofar as it is concerned almost exclusively with emulation of the *pecuniary* variety—but this is a limitation that we will address shortly.) In Marx’s view, use-value and exchange-value are quite distinct, both analytically and in everyday life, with the key exception that use-value is a prerequisite for exchange-value. Veblen’s perspective, however, offers an understanding of the commodity wherein exchange-value in fact *precedes* use-value, to use the Marxian terminology. To explicate: a commodity may only be of emulative utility—that is, a commodity-object may only be an *invidious use-value*—by virtue of its very existence as an exchange-value. Furthermore, a commodity’s emulative usefulness is not merely *facilitated* by its exchange-value; rather, its invidious utility is in fact *directly proportional to* its exchange-value. In this view, Veblen’s perspective of the commodity constitutes a thoroughgoing—and most interesting—inversion of the Marxian analysis.

**Emulation beyond the pecuniary**

The evidence of possession of wealth—that is, conspicuous waste—is not, however, the only basis upon which an invidious comparison between persons may be made. According to Veblen’s perspective, in the interests of procuring and maintaining esteem it should not be long before individuals turn to some other means of distinguishing themselves from those who would otherwise be their peers, since the scope for emulation afforded by measures that are purely pecuniary, or even principally pecuniary, is markedly limited. Indeed, it must be recognised that few bases of invidious comparison are solely pecuniary in nature. Take, for example, such phenomena as ‘good’ manners and a knowledge of archaic languages, as discussed above, whose chief purpose Veblen would understand to be the demonstration of financial strength by virtue of their quality as artefacts of leisure: such customs are not merely pecuniary but are also inarguably cultural in nature. On this relationship between the pecuniary and other modes of emulation, Veblen observes:

> A standard of life would still be possible which should admit of invidious comparison in other respects than that of opulence; as, for instance, a comparison in various directions in the manifestation of moral, physical, intellectual, or aesthetic force. Comparison in all these directions is in vogue today; and the comparison made in these respects is commonly so inextricably bound up with the pecuniary comparison as to be scarcely distinguishable from the latter. This is especially true as regards the current rating of expressions of intellectual and aesthetic force or proficiency; so that we frequently interpret as aesthetic or intellectual a difference which in substance is pecuniary only. (Veblen 1953: 77-78)

This observation holds contemporarily true within many realms of society, for the distinction between commercial and cultural value is today frequently muddied, but
the present relevance of Veblen’s notion is perhaps most evident within the realm of fashion, wherein price is almost universally misconstrued as aesthetic worth. The design of two garments, the quality of their fabrics and their production values, may be all but identical—certainly as functional use-values, that is, as regards the shelter or warmth that they provide, they would likely be identical—but so long as one is more expensive than the other, and so long as some minute formal discrepancy exists between the two, then so shall that unique feature of the more costly item be commonly taken as the mark of aesthetic superiority. In the qualitatively subjective—or at least socially acquiescent—realm of aesthetics, pecuniary value steps in as the quantitative measure against which disputes may be resolved. As regards this matter, Veblen remarks that:

any valuable object in order to appeal to our sense of beauty must conform to the requirements of beauty and expensiveness both. But this is not all. Beyond this the canon of expensiveness also affects our tastes in such a way as to inextricably blend the marks of expensiveness, in our appreciation, with the beautiful features of the object, and to subsume the resultant effect under the head of an appreciation of beauty simply. The marks of expensiveness come to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive articles. … [W]e often declare that an article of apparel, for instance, is ‘perfectly lovely,’ when pretty much all that an analysis of the aesthetic value of the article would leave ground for is the declaration that it is pecuniarily honorific. (Veblen 1953: 97)

Further, inasmuch as such non-industrious knowledge as that of fashion and aesthetics also serves as evidence of leisure, garments that are at once expensive and esoteric are doubly effective as objects of an invidious comparison. Moreover, it may in fact be understood that exchange-value in this way begets aesthetic value, but also that aesthetic value reciprocally begets exchange-value. This paradox is a matter of no small consequence; presently more pressing, however, is the question of the mechanisms by which pecuniary worth might parade as value of an aesthetic, intellectual or other variety.

The superlative object of invidious comparison: corporate branding
To prolong the theme of couture for a moment, an example of the means by which pecuniary value—that is, exchange-value—imposes itself upon other measures of worth—in this case, aesthetic value—may be found in the contrasting or otherwise accentuated toes which traditionally feature on women’s footwear designed by the Parisian fashion house Chanel. This characteristic design feature of Chanel shoes is an aesthetic attribute which serves to render patent a quality of the shoes that is of a different order and which would for the most part be otherwise imperceptible, namely their pecuniary value (insofar as accentuated toes distinguish Chanel shoes, which are, in turn, recognisable as ‘wastefully expensive’, in the Veblenian sense). It is through such practices, wherein aesthetic qualities are employed to fulfil the evidentiary requirements of pecuniary emulation, that differences which are in essence merely pecuniary are mistaken for degrees of aesthetic merit: the contrasting toes of Chanel
shoes come to be understood as a beautiful detail, yet they are in fact merely a trademark detail. Further, such a signature feature or trademark as the toes of Chanel shoes is but one manifestation of the institution of branding, that is, in the sense in which the latter is understood today. Veblen perhaps foresaw the proliferation of this very institution, or indeed its pending ubiquity, for he recognised that:

it is customary to assume some badge or insignia of honour that will serve as a conventionally accepted mark of exploit, and which at the same time indicates the quantity or degree of exploit of which it is the symbol. As the population increases in density, and as human relations grow more complex and numerous, all the details of life undergo a process of elaboration and selection; and in this process of elaboration the use of trophies develops into a system of rank, titles, degrees and insignia, typical examples of which are heraldic devices, medals, and honorary decorations. (Veblen 1953: 46)

Brand names and logos would today be a useful addition to this latter inventory of evidentiary means. Indeed, it might be reasonably assumed that the institution of branding constitutes the pinnacle of the evolution of pecuniary emulation: by means so simple as the inscription of an identifiable logo mark, any commodity-object—however prosaic it might otherwise seem—may be transformed into potent evidence of pecuniary standing. Whilst it must be admitted that a brand may be a mark of quality—that is, a means of identifying commodities whose superior materials or manufacture may indeed heighten their concrete usefulness—it is nevertheless the case that the most regarded or passionately sought-after brands, i.e., those which sit at the top of the heap of invidious significative comparison, are those which are renowned simply for being the most expensive. They are known, if not in so many words, for most successfully attracting superlative prices for commodity-objects that, in functional terms, represent use-values which could be attained for a very fraction of the cost. Accordingly, Veblen states, simply, that “if these articles of consumption are costly, they are felt to be noble and honorific” (1953: 61-62). Branding’s emulative efficacy, and its innate capacity for such, is demonstrated by the existence of such objects as Mont Blanc pens, whose hefty price tag belies the fact that the functional purpose which they serve could be readily fulfilled equally well by a 50-cent ballpoint. This emulative efficacy and the popular comprehension thereof, but also the potential repudiation thereof, is additionally evidenced by the mantra of the frugal consumer, who avoids ‘just paying for the brand’.

In fact, in Per Mollerup’s estimation, heraldic devices are the explicit antecedents of contemporary corporate logos (see Mollerup 1997).

If logos indeed constitute the pinnacle of ‘conventionally accepted marks of exploit’, we might understand that the paramount brands are those which embody the greatest magnitude of exploitation—perhaps it is for this reason that such maligned brands as Nike, Shell and General Electric number among Business Week and Interbrand’s ‘100 Top Brands’ of 2003 (BusinessWeek 2003).

On this note, it is also worth considering the adage ‘you get what you pay for’. This may sometimes represent a truth regarding the association between the price and the quality of an object, but this is by no means always the case; such an adage at once demonstrates and perpetuates the popular (mis)understanding that the quality of an object, and perhaps also its utility, is closely correlated to its price.
The non-invidious commodity
We saw above that, by virtue of the motive of emulation, the distinction between the exchange-value of a commodity and its other qualities—its aesthetic worth, for example—stands to become somewhat muddied. This necessitates a closer examination of the effects of the regime of emulation upon the survival, in the realm of objects, of values which might be understood to run contrary to the emulative motive. Specifically, we are drawn back, at this point, to the question of the potential for radical or activist practice within the realm of the commodity. We must, in other words, appraise the possibility, or otherwise, of that which may be understood, in Veblenian terms, as a non-invidious commodity.

Veblen ascribes tendencies of a humanistic or altruistic variety—namely the “motives of charity and of social good-fellowship, or conviviality; or, in more general terms, the various expressions of the sense of human solidarity and sympathy” (Veblen 1953: 217)—to an ‘ante-predatory’, and thus pre-leisure-class, phase of society. He posits that any present-day materialisation of non-invidious inclinations is merely the persistence of such ‘archaic traits’. Veblen holds that “[u]nder the regime of emulation the members of a modern industrial community are rivals, each of whom will best attain his individual and immediate advantage if, through an exceptional exemption from scruple, he is able to overreach and injure his fellows when the chance offers” (1953: 154). Thus, in modern society, the “characteristics named above as serving the interests of community are disserviceable to the individual, rather than otherwise” (1953: 154). Veblen additionally posits that those individuals who are “gifted with a temperament that is reminiscent of the ante-predatory culture are … exposed to something of a moral constraint which urges them to disregard these inclinations, in that the code of proprieties enjoins upon them habits of life based on the predatory aptitudes” (1953: 220).

In spite of these rather gloomy observations, however, there exists in Veblen’s writing the traces of an argument which somewhat mitigates his rather dystopian position and which evidently admits the possibility of an (effectively revolutionary) altruism within the realm of the commodity. Specifically, he concedes that non-pecuniary and indeed non-invidious interests may be validly present alongside emulative concerns. Admittedly, this is in spite of his position that “these [emulative] canons of decency go far to make all non-invidious aspiration or effort nugatory” (Veblen 1953: 228). Yet, in sum, despite the fact that his perspective questions the survival of any altruistic interest, he recognises that apparently non-invidious efforts may nevertheless prevail. In fact, he admits that the prevalence of mere attempts at non-invidious endeavours “indicates the presence in modern life of an effective scepticism with respect to the full legitimacy of an emulative scheme of life” (Veblen 1953: 221). Thus, Veblen admits that philanthropic or otherwise radical motives may indeed co-exist, in practice, with those of the competitive variety.

I should emphasise, however, that the expression of an untainted non-invidious sentiment is, in Veblen’s view, an impossibility. Moreover, he may even have deemed
ridiculous the notion that such a sentiment might be validly manifest within the sphere of commodities:

It is a matter of sufficient notoriety to have become a commonplace jest that extraneous motives are commonly present among the incentives to [the non-invidious] class of work—motives of a self-regarding kind, and especially the motive of an invidious distinction. To such an extent is this true, that many ostensible works of disinterested public spirit are no doubt initiated and carried on with a view primarily to the enhanced repute, or even to the pecuniary gain, of their promoters. (Veblen 1953: 221)

Here lies an observation which is of great significance to the question of radical commodities. Veblen draws attention here to a phenomenon which is most disruptive of the possibility of a genuinely non-invidious commodity, and which also complicates the notion of a radical commodity; this is namely the latent tendency within apparently non-invidious activity toward invidious comparison, which may otherwise be understood summarily (as it is popularly) as the egotistical or competitive ulterior motive of supposedly non-invidious endeavours. Such invidiously comparative undercurrents may predictably take opulence as their primary measure, as the case may be where sizeable financial donations are made to charitable institutions or causes, for such expenditure, although notionally benevolent, may be readily perceived as the conspicuous demonstration of pecuniary strength.

Alternatively, however, these emulative undercurrents may instead take as their principle gauge such non-pecuniary spheres as morality. It is the omnipresent and formidable threat of the latter in particular—which might be understood as ‘moral emulation’, namely a valuation of persons in respect of worth on grounds of morality—that most complicates the concept of a defensibly radical commodity, for the distinction between morally emulative and sincerely social-minded motives in supposedly non-invidious activities may rarely be easily made. In other words, whilst Veblen again concedes that “[t]he fact itself that distinction or a decent good fame is sought by this method is evidence of a prevalent sense of the legitimacy … of a non-emulative, non-invidious interest, as a consistent factor in the habits of thought of modern communities” (1953: 222), it is nevertheless the case that any attempt to distinguish between emulative and non-emulative motives may in fact be futile. That is to say, it perhaps matters not, in the end, whether the production and consumption of radical commodities is motivated by an emulative or a genuinely social-minded interest. By virtue of the conspicuity characteristic of the commodity-form, even if the production and consumption of apparently radical commodities is motivated by a socially-minded interest, the same production and consumption inevitably comes to resemble that which has emulation as its motive. So long as the oppositional sentiment of a radical commodity is conspicuous (as is invariably the case) so does it constitute the ideal object of an invidious comparison on grounds of morality. Indeed,

10 This indistinction is certainly apparent in those cases which are included in this study. Indeed, this is a recurring theme throughout Part II.
insofar as the production of radical commodities must certainly issue from a surety as regards one’s moral convictions, the manifestation of one’s oppositional sentiment through the medium of a commodity must, by definition, constitute the fuel of an invidious comparison, for such an act inherently and conspicuously contrasts one’s own principles with the relative amorality thus supposed of the status quo.

**The subversive commodity**

In view of the preceding discussions of the institution of emulation—and particularly in view of the potential charge of *moral emulation*, which throws a proverbial spanner of no insignificant size into the works of radical commodities—it is worth contemplating: is it possible to conceive of a variety of radical commodity that would be impervious to absorption by the logic of emulation?

The radical commodities studied in Part II of this dissertation principally act as channels of intentional, politically charged communication. So long as the politics of the producers of these commodities are overt, however, then so might the charge of moral emulation be levelled at them. Against such a charge, the commodities here studied typically also incorporate some form of apparently non-invidious or ‘ethical’ practice. (Notably, however, the latter is almost invariably of a pecuniary nature, and typically takes the form of a donation to a charitable cause, as in the case of Rage Against The Machine’s benefit concerts. By comparison, the notionally empowering undertaking of ‘fair trade’ with underprivileged communities, as carried out by The Body Shop, is a little more complex, and yet it is still pecuniary in nature.) This practical action may be motivated by a genuinely social-minded sentiment, and indeed it may be perceived as the evidence of such. That is to say, these commodities may be seen to ‘practice what they preach’. However, this apparently altruistic activity might alternatively be perceived (or even intended) negatively, namely as an attempt to bolster what is merely the semblance of a non-invidious sentiment, i.e., that which is, in fact, at base, an emulative act.

In light of this problem, we might conceive of a particular variety of radical commodity, the insurgent tendencies of which would be hidden from view. This would namely be a *subversive* commodity. Let us thus hypothesise for a moment: such an object may, for example, take the form of a remarkably simple item that is manufactured using ecologically sound materials, by well-paid workers, yet which is marketed to upper-class consumers and sold at considerable profit. The proceeds from its sale would then be directed, in secrecy, to support underprivileged communities. Such a concealment of the non-invidious motive would preclude any accusations of moral emulation.11

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11 It must be acknowledged that other methods within the capitalist system, such as a tax proportional to wealth, for example, may effect equally well the same outcome, if not more effectively so. Such an strategy as a tax, however, does not constitute an instance of the commodity-form (in spite of the fact that it acts upon it), and it is the latter with which we are here specifically concerned.
This subversive variety of radical commodity might in fact be the ideal type of radical commodity. This, however, is purely an academic exercise. It is the case, for better or worse, that radical commodities do not, in practice, closely resemble such a theoretical ideal, perhaps by virtue of such pragmatic imperatives as the already complex requirement of remaining solvent and competitive in a commercial environment wherein expansionism is the prevailing ethos. Nevertheless, two of the cases discussed in this study do incorporate some of the characteristics of this hypothetical variety of (anti-)commodity. Specifically, there is a certain subversiveness about Freitag bags, for example, on account of the fact that the ecological character of their use of recycled materials is concealed behind the aesthetic quality which results from the same. Adbusters’ Blackspot shoes, meanwhile, exhibit a number of those practical considerations described above (as regards materials, as well as workers’ wages and treatment), and yet the marketing thereof causes complications (as we will discuss in Chapter Nine). Blackspot shoes are therefore representative of the point at which the existent diverges most sharply from the hypothetical, namely in respect of the conspicuity of the activistic or benevolent motives which apparently underlie the production of such commodities. And yet, whilst this very conspicuity might prompt accusations of emulative motives, as it indeed does, it might also be argued that the concealment of these motives and practices would run contrary to the evolved character of the contemporary commodity as an instrument of communication.

**Strategies and tactics**

Leaving the problem of the technical specifics of radical commodities aside for the moment, I would like to focus upon the question of the essential analytic significance of Veblen’s examination of conspicuous consumption.

Marx’s project is of course a critique of political economy and the ideology and apparent machinations thereof; on a number of occasions, however, he becomes trapped within, or at least constricted by, the economic *Weltanshauung* and his own idealism. This is most apparent with regard to consumption, which he can but barely grasp outside of its economic sense, namely as a moment of finality, as the moment in which a product of labour attains its full finish as an object of utility, the moment in which the commodity-as-exchange-value is returned to the subject as a use-value, and as the moment in which the process of production at once concludes and is renewed. There exists, however, a whole other mode of practice under the head of consumption, and we have seen a seminal recognition of this in Veblen’s analysis of conspicuous consumption. Whilst conspicuous consumption is underlain by a motive of emulation, what is important here is not this competitive tendency *per se*; rather, of significance is the fact of its expression in and through the system of commodities. It is in this way that Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption is important: what he recognised was a variety of production-through-consumption (or, in other words, consumption-as-production; I use these terms interchangeably). That is to say, his analysis draws
attention to a mode of practice wherein the significance of objects arises with their use. Yet, whilst Veblen’s analysis of conspicuous consumption constitutes a seminal recognition of consumption as use, this is a matter which is contemplated in much more detail by Michel de Certeau. Further, as compared to Veblen’s work, de Certeau’s analysis is more pertinent to the question of radical commodities, since, as we shall see, the latter is explicitly political in nature.

In de Certeau’s analysis, consumption as use is namely a tactical consumption. The concept of consumption-as-production is undoubtedly relevant here, for this is most certainly a consumption from which emerges an alternate utility. I should point out, however, that that production which is realised through consumption is a variety of production that could hardly be further removed from the Marxian view thereof. This is evident in de Certeau’s explication:

To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called ‘consumption.’ The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (de Certeau 1984: xii–xiii)

We have seen in Veblen’s analysis an account of this production-through-consumption as it pertains to the upper classes, namely a production-through-consumption of the signs of status, as an expression of the upper classes’ collective superiority over the lower classes or as a means of emulative infighting. Yet, whilst it is reasonable to assume that this is a phenomenon that began with the rich, as Veblen would indeed argue, before filtering down through the social strata in concurrence with the growth of the industrial society, it is explicitly the ‘weak’—and implicitly the lower classes—with whom de Certeau aligns tactical consumption; he professes that the objective of his analysis is to “bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term ‘consumers’” (de Certeau 1984: xi–xii). Indeed, it is the lower classes for whom consumption-as-production is most politically-charged, purely on account of the fact that this is the only variety of production that most persons are ever likely to have access to; it must be noted, however, that this is not necessarily so impoverished a variety of production as might be first assumed.

A distinction in terms of power (which is effectively associable with a distinction in terms of class) is fundamental to de Certeau’s delineation of a tactic and its obverse, a strategy. Furthermore, the notion of space is decidedly important as regards the distinction between the two. Let us firstly review de Certeau’s definition of a strategy:

I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a
scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. As in management, every 'strategic' rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its ‘own’ place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an ‘environment’. (de Certeau 1984: 35–36)

Thus we may appreciate, in contrast, the concept of a tactic:

By contrast with a strategy…, a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. … What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (de Certeau 1984: 36–37)

Of course, we should not adopt too strict an understanding of ‘space’ as it pertains to strategies and tactics. That is to say, de Certeau’s formulation constitutes a most valuable contribution to an understanding of the critique-through-practice of the capitalist order itself, and yet, in order to be useful in this regard, we must appreciate that, insofar as the logic of capitalism is reproduced in and through the commodity-form, the territory of the capitalist order is at once the whole field of commodity-objects and all relations issuing from the exchange of the same. This is not a space in the strictest sense, but it is nevertheless the space from which the strategies of the capitalist order issue, and the space upon which they are played out. (It might also be understood that the strategies of the capitalist order are played out through the actions of its willing subjects—corporations, financial institutions, ‘democratic’ governments, etc.—and indeed through the actions of all who reproduce the established customs of capitalism.) Accordingly, it is upon this ‘space’ that a tactical consumption or critique is played out. Such tactics therefore constitute a variety of resistance that acts upon, through and in spite of the system of commodities.

A tactical consumption inscribes its own meaning upon the space of the other; tactics are, in short, “modes of use—or rather re-use” (de Certeau 1984: 30). In other words, “[e]veryday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (de Certeau 1984: xii). Describing the tactical nature of their practices, de Certeau (1984: 34) suggests that consumers trace “indeterminate trajectories” across the systems and spaces through which they move. These trajectories or traverses are never determined by their environment, nor can they ever be pinned down; they move within and across established systems, but they bring with them their own values:
Although they use as their material the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, the supermarket or city planning), although they remain within the framework of prescribed syntaxes…, these ‘traverses’ remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires. (de Certeau 1984: 34)

In anticipation of matters that we will discuss in the coming chapter, we may draw a comparison here with the Saussurean distinction between langue and parole (language and speech): a tactical consumption is akin to a variety of speech that uses as its material the language of the system of commodities.12 The notion of a tactical consumption is also akin to John Fiske’s concept of excorporation; after de Certeau, Fiske has defined excorporation as “the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system” (Fiske 1989: 15). Further to this, Fiske makes a distinction between mass culture and popular culture: the former is the materialisation of the dominant order, whilst the latter is an explicitly unordered and unpredictable system of usages layered upon the first. In de Certeauian terms, mass culture is the space of strategic articulation, popular culture the domain of the tactic.

It must be noted, however, as regards mass culture or the space of strategy, and in furtherance of our earlier discussion regarding our working definition of ‘space’, that we are not dealing with finite spaces or discrete strategies. On account of the contemporary ubiquity of the commodity, capitalism’s territory is today effectively all-encompassing:

Consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere. Because of this, the ‘strategic’ model is also transformed, as if defeated by its own success: it was by definition based on the definition of a ‘proper’ distinct from everything else; but now that ‘proper’ has become the whole. (de Certeau 1984: 40, my emphasis)

Our focus must therefore shift slightly, from a conception of tactics in terms of their opposition to strategies per se, to an analysis of tactics in the face of an apparently illimitable system that is strategic in its entirety. If it is understood that there is no longer an elsewhere which is opposed to the capitalist system, a tactics of consumption is consequently recast as a practice that is of great political significance—a tactics of consumption is possibly the only means of resistance that remains open to those who are otherwise subjugated by the system. Indeed, de Certeau’s analysis is professedly “concerned with battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the ‘actions’ which remain possible for the latter” (1984: 34, my emphasis).13 In view of the omnipresence of the capitalist order, we should

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12 Indeed, de Certeau (1984: 32–33) himself briefly draws upon Saussure, via Gilbert Ryle.
13 As can been seen here, the militaristic connotations of de Certeau’s terminology are entirely intended.
recognise that “[t]he tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, … lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (de Certeau 1984: xvii). It appears, therefore, that we may genuinely speak of a politics of everyday life.

A tactics of consumption is also, for de Certeau, akin to la perruque, a practice of economic diversion, defined as “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (de Certeau 1984: 25). Thus, once more, we are apparently faced with two systems, interwoven, each with its own motives and values:

These [tactical] styles of action intervene in a field which regulates them at a first level (for example, at the level of the factory system), but they introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage that obeys other rules and constitutes something like a second level interwoven into the first (for instance, la perruque). (de Certeau 1984: 30)

By way of this analogy, we may again observe that the sphere of tactical consumption constitutes an often imperceptible array of practices woven through the system of objects. Radical commodities, however, are also akin to la perruque: from one perspective, they are exchange-values and are perfectly consistent with the logic of contemporary capitalism; from another, they are radical propaganda and/or a substantive affront to the same capitalist system. Radical commodities are, in short, appreciable as political work disguised as economic work. They propagate an oppositional politics by way of an institution (the world of commodities) that is otherwise the quintessence of the dominant order. (The comparison with la perruque is perhaps especially relevant with regard to RATM, Naomi Klein and Michael Moore, i.e., those radical authors and artists whose work is published by otherwise conservative multinational corporations.) According to de Certeau’s analysis, such an act is of political significance per se, that is, irrespective of its content: “[t]his practice of economic diversion is in reality the return of a sociopolitical ethics into an economic system” (1984: 27). This observation brings to light a most significant correlation between ethics and politics under capitalism: not only does the introduction of an alternative ethics into the realm of commodities constitute a political act, but, in this realm, which is characterised by an apparent post-ethicality (i.e., by the ostensible suspension of ethics), the evident pronouncement of any ethical position is an inherently political act.

Whilst I have traced some similarities between radical commodities and a de Certeauian tactics, I would argue that de Certeau’s opposing concepts of strategy and tactic should not be too firmly associated with, respectively, the machinations of the system and the practices of those whose values run contrary to it. That is to say, resistance within and to the system is not necessarily confined to the sphere of tactics; we might discern not only tactical modes of resistance, but also those which are, at least in part, strategic in nature. To be precise, the production of radical commodities, as a mode of political action, demonstrates qualities of both the strategy and the tactic. If the tactics of consumption are an ‘art of the weak’, radical commodities might be
properly understood as an “art of being in-between” (de Certeau 1984: 30). In radical commodities, we find a variety of radical political action which plays upon the terrain of the other, but which, in so doing, also carves out its own place. To draw an analogy: the strategic system of capitalism controls at once the field of play and the rules of the game; a tactics of consumption, meanwhile, has no positive effect upon the field of play, but it (imperceptibly) interposes its own rules upon that terrain. The production of radical commodities may be distinguished from both of these varieties of power play. Like a purely tactical resistance, it is limited in its ability to alter the structural rules imposed by the system (although, again like a tactic, it may subtly articulate its own rules). Yet, unlike a purely tactical practice, the production of radical commodities, by definition, ekes out its own space upon the field of contest. (Admittedly, however, this is a space-within-a-space, since, as de Certeau has observed, there is no longer an elsewhere external to the space of the strategy.) It is for this reason that radical commodities may be understood, as compared to the de Certeauian notions of strategy and tactic, as an intermediary variety of action.

Thus, in contrast to a tactical resistance-through-consumption, we may understand that radical commodities are the outcome of a resistance-through-production. In the Marxian view, such a commodified mode of radical political action would be more than a little problematic. We are beginning to see, however, that such a practice might be valid after all. Moreover, it might be argued that the production of radical commodities constitutes a significantly more potent variety of resistance than does a tactics of consumption. That is to say, the latter merely facilitates survival; it is not a means of rebellion, or an avenue for change: “[t]he actual order of things is precisely what ‘popular’ tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon” (de Certeau 1984: 26, my emphasis). According to de Certeau’s analysis, a tactic is simply a way of ‘making do’. Thus, whilst the tactics of ‘making do’ play with and upon the order of things—without, as de Certeau observes, any recourse to actually change that order—it might be understood that radical commodities constitute something of a radical Trojan horse within the dominant order of things. That is to say, whilst a tactical consumption is limited to a play upon the surface, it might be understood that the production of radical commodities affords something of an opening in the otherwise seemingly impenetrable façade of the spectacle that is contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion
We have seen that, according to the Marxian analysis, the commodity-form is a mechanism through which persons are manipulated and exploited (this applies particularly to members of the working classes), and are alienated from one another

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14 This phrase—‘art of being in-between’—is employed by de Certeau as an alternative way of illustrating the idea of the tactic, but I would argue that it is in fact more applicable to practices which exhibit qualities of both the strategy and the tactic.

15 Where a tactic of consumption is a subversion at the surface of the system, it might be understood that radical commodities constitute, in some measure, and to differing degrees, a subversion of the structure of the system.
and indeed from their inner selves. Therefore, after Marx, we must question the very possibility of the doing of radicalism in the realm of the commodity, for if the commodity-form is inherently exploitative, any purportedly radical commodity would merely perpetuate, in spite of its best intentions, this exploitative structure.

Yet, the extra-economic consequences of the commodity, namely those rituals which arise around commodity-objects, confounded Marx—or, at least, they escaped his analysis. These are practices and understandings which arise not simply because commodities are products of labour or because they are economic articles, or even because they are functional things in the strict sense (use-values), but because they are also objects around which human relationships are organised. This social function of consumption is by no means independent of the commodity-form, and yet it demands an analytic approach unlike that of Marx. Of course, it is just such an approach which we find in Veblen’s work.

Whilst the world of commodities is, for Veblen, a site of contest, of one-upmanship, his analysis of conspicuous consumption, is, as has been mentioned, a seminal perspective of consumption as use, and it is in this regard that we find some grounds for optimism as regards the possibility of a legitimately radical commodity. (This notion of consumption-as-use is to be distinguished, of course, from the rather more particular Marxian category of use-value.) To be precise, a perspective of consumption as use reveals a variety of practice which, although it acts upon the world of commodity-objects, acts, in some measure, in spite of the commodity-structure. In this way, we may draw the conclusion that there is at least some potential for resistance in the realm of the commodity. Indeed, this is a conclusion which is more clearly articulated in de Certeau’s conception of a tactic.

However, the notion of a freedom of movement, as it were, through the realm of commodities is not so straightforward. Two problems arise here. Firstly, in Veblen’s work, we see that, through their consumption habits, the members of the leisure class produce the signs of status. In other words, Veblen’s work is a seminal moment in the recognition of the function of commodity-objects as signs. This points to a problem of tactical consumption, for there is, as we will see, a structural correlation, a symbiosis, between the sign-form and the commodity-form. For this reason, the sign-function of objects is not necessarily divorced from the structural ills of the commodity-form, even if mass-cultural objects may be appropriated in accordance with ‘different interests’. Secondly, the notions of freedom and of the possibility of consumers’ self-realisation do not run contrary to contemporary capitalism; rather, they are key motifs thereof. Accordingly, in pursuit of a better understanding of the system in which radical commodities are implicated, and with which they must contend, we shall, in the next two chapters, concern ourselves with the semiology of objects, with the question of the capitalist ideology, and with the correlations between the two.
3. The Commodity as a Signifier of Lost Relationships

The question of the function of the commodity as a sign is of fundamental importance to an analysis of radical commodities, yet this is a matter which has been heretofore considered only peripherally. Our survey of Veblen’s work in the previous chapter brought to light the capacity of the commodity to be inscribed with meaning, insofar as recognisably expensive commodity-objects can serve as indicators of their owner’s pecuniary strength. It is not the case, however, that commodity-objects may serve merely as signs of pecuniary might. Indeed, not only theoretical but also common-sense understandings today reveal that commodity-objects may serve as expressions or indicators of almost any quality, inclination or affiliation. Of course, commodities might accordingly manifest an oppositional political position. In this way, however, a radical politics becomes most thoroughly entwined with the logic of the commodity, since, as we will see, the sign-function of commodity-objects plays a central role in the ideological machinations of contemporary capitalism. Needless to say, the plausibility of the notion of a radical commodity is thus thrown into a state of even greater uncertainty.

In order to begin to delineate the relationship between the capitalist ideology and the structures of the sign and the commodity, we shall, in this chapter, look at Roland Barthes’s seminal analyses of the sign-function of objects, and also review the foundation thereof, namely Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, before delving into the work of Jean Baudrillard, wherein semiology and the Marxian critique of political economy converge.

A nascent semiology of the object
Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*, originally published in 1957, is, in the author’s own words, “an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass-culture [and] a first attempt to analyse semantically the mechanics of this language” (1973: 9). Barthes’s analyses therein are renowned as the first application of Saussurean structural linguistics to the world of commodities, a first reading of objects as signifiers in a language—indeed, Barthes himself claims that “semiological analysis [was] initiated … in the final essay of *Mythologies*” (1973: 9).

The objects of Barthes’s analyses in *Mythologies* are the things and phenomena of the everyday—or, at least, the things of the everyday in France of the mid-1950s—such as soap-powders and detergents, margarine, steak and chips, the world of wrestling and the new Citroën. Barthes views margarine, because it is overtly an ersatz of butter, as a strategic habituating of the consumer to the imperfections of ‘the Established Order’: “[a] little ‘confessed’ evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil” (1973: 42). Steak and chips, meanwhile, are quintessentially “nostalgic and patriotic”—they are, respectively, “the very flesh of the French soldier” and “the alimentary sign of Frenchness” (1973: 63-64). And the new Citroën D.S. 19—
automobile, popularly known as the ‘Déesse’ or the ‘Goddess’, whose design was, at the time, revolutionary in terms of both engineering and styling—actualises, in Barthes’s view, “the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement” (1973: 90).

We can already discern, in these examples, two discrete motives at work. That is to say, there is, in Mythologies, a conflation of two projects, the unification of which is most significant, but which is also, at times, somewhat confusing, since this is a unity which is not, analytically speaking, strictly necessary. These discrete projects forcibly combined are namely (1) a theory of ‘myth’ and (2) a semiological analysis of commodities. Both of these are of immeasurable importance to the study at hand, but we shall initially consider the former. In so doing, however, it is necessary to firstly look briefly to the progenitor of the variety of analysis advanced by Barthes, namely Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure scrutinises, in the first chapter of his Course in General Linguistics, the linguistic sign, which he explicates thus:

the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms. … [B]oth terms involved in the linguistic sign are psychological and are united in the brain by an associative bond. This point must be emphasised. The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it ‘material,’ it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract. (Saussure 1974: 65-66)

Further, Saussure observes that the definition of the linguistic sign poses ‘an important question of terminology’. As a consequence of this observation, the now-familiar nomenclature of semiology was born:

I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a sign, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a word, for example (arbor, etc.). One tends to forget that arbor is called a sign only because it carries the concept ‘tree,’ … Ambiguity would disappear if the three notions involved here were designated by three names, each suggesting and opposing the others. I propose to retain the word sign [signe] to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified [signifié] and signifier [signifiant] (Saussure 1974: 67)

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1 We should note that, in the Saussurean formulation, the sign is, although bipartite, an entirely psychological thing—it is “a two-sided psychological entity” (Saussure 1974: 66). The signified is typically understood as a concept in the mind; the signifier, however, is frequently taken to be the word, image, object or other material thing itself. Yet, in a strictly Saussurean sense, the signifier is also psychological, it is in fact sense-data, a distinction which is captured by the supplanted Saussurean term ‘sound-image’: the signifier is that which registers on our senses when we see or hear (or otherwise sense) these objective stimuli. Thus, for Saussure, both the signifier and signified are psychological; only the positive manifestation of their combination, the sign—that is, the word—may be material (whether spoken or written). For Barthes, however, the mythical signifier is always material: recall that that which is a signifier at the level of myth is always already a sign at the level of language, thus is always already material: “the mythical signifier … is already linguistic: since it is constituted by a meaning which is already outlined, it can appear only through a given substance (whereas in language, the signifier remains mental)” (Barthes 1973: 121-122).
To restate: when a word registers on our senses, it becomes a **signifier**, to which we relate a corresponding concept, a **signified**; together, these constitute a **sign**. Barthes’s formulation of myth evolves directly from this model. For him, myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (Barthes 1973: 114)

Barthes (1973: 115) therefore distinguishes two semiological systems, namely those of **language** and **myth**, or of a **language-object** and a **metalanguage**, the former functionally preceding the latter. In this formulation, at the level of language, the signifying syntagm ‘a bouquet of roses’ (to borrow a Barthesian example) would likely evoke the conception of just such a bouquet; at the level of myth, however, this first linguistic sign in its totality—that is, the signifying syntagm and the consequently conceived bouquet—serves merely as another signifier, for which the corresponding signified may be the concept of romance. One should not say, therefore, that the sound-image ‘a bouquet of roses’ signifies the concept of romance, but rather that ‘a bouquet of roses’ signifies the concept of a bouquet of roses, and that these together (sound-image and concept) in turn signify romance. This notion of “staggered systems” of signification was explicated by Barthes in a later work—*Éléments de Sémiologie* of 1964—as the distinction between ‘denotation’ and ‘connotation’ (in translation, Barthes 1968: 89-94); myth, therefore, is a *connoted system*.³

We come now to the question of the second project of *Mythologies*, namely the semiological analysis of commodity-objects and cultural practices. *Mythologies* is, at base, a **study of meaning**; whilst all of its essays, with the exception of the last, are analyses of the **specific** meanings of objects and practices (specific meanings, that is, as they are understood by Barthes), the underlying theme of the book is an analysis of how meaning is created in general, a theme that becomes manifest in the book’s final essay. We have seen that myth is a connoted semiological system, but we have thus far considered myth principally in abstract terms and in terms of language proper. In

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² I refer here to a word specifically because Saussure himself applied his theories all-but-exclusively to the units of language proper.

³ Notably, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, a contemporary of Saussure, also recognised such a staggering of signification. In his writings on *semiotics*, Peirce conceived that the ‘interpreant’ (loosely akin to Saussure’s ‘signified’) of one signification may serve as the ‘representamen’ (correspondingly akin to Saussure’s ‘signifier’) of a subsequent association, and so on, in a theoretically infinite chain (see diagram in Crow 2003: 37; see also Peirce and Hoopes 1991). (Saussure and Peirce all-but-concurrently, albeit independently, developed very similar ‘sciences of signs’, respectively coined ‘semiology’ and ‘semiotics’. The two appellations are today essentially interchangeable, with the exception that the former is more accurately associative with the European tradition, the latter with the American tradition.) We should derive from Peirce’s ideas the notion that signification may comprise a sequential process across many strata, one that consists not merely of language and one level of myth, or, in other words, a single level of connotation. Yet, in spite of the fact that Peirce’s work incorporated ideas which did not emerge in Europe until Barthes’s much later development of Saussure’s theories, I shall continue to focus upon the European tradition, since the Continent has had the most to offer as regards the semiological (sic) analysis of commodities. That is to say, Saussure’s heritage is of the greater relevance to the study at hand, inasmuch as European and specifically French theorists have contributed the seminal texts to the semiology of extra-linguistic systems, i.e., systems that are outside of language proper, such as that of commodity-objects. Of course, it is accordingly Saussure’s terminology and concepts which prevail in my own work.
the study of myth, however, the matter of the carriers of myth, so to speak, is of no less importance than is the structural analysis of the mythological system.

Barthes offers the (oft-quoted) proposition that “myth is a type of speech” (1973: 109). (He is here evoking the Saussurean distinction between language (langs) and speech (parole): langue “is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty” (Saussure 1974: 9); accordingly, parole names the execution of language (see Saussure 1974: 13). Thus, we might recognise, summarily, that ‘speech’ refers to the use of the system of language.) From this arises the question of the carriers of myth, i.e., the question of what it is that may constitute “the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system” (Barthes 1973: 115). Barthes states:

since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. … Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. … We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something. This generic way of conceiving language is in fact justified by the very history of writing: long before the invention of our alphabet, objects like the Inca quipu, or drawings, as in pictographs, have been accepted as speech. (Barthes 1973: 109-111)

Thus, because myth is a language after language—or, rather, a system of meaning that comes into play after language proper—as illustrated by the aforementioned notion of staggered systems of signification, we may take objects, and thus commodity-objects, but also the rituals that are arranged around them, as language-objects, as things which are not merely use-values and exchange-values but which are carriers of meaning: “the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth” (Barthes 1968: 114). “This”, states Barthes, “is why the semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both signs, that they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language-object” (1968: 115). Thus, to reiterate, we may treat as language-objects not merely writing and pictures but also objects and practices, insofar as all such things confront us in precisely the same manner, namely as sense-data, as signifiers.

I asserted above that the two projects in Mythologies—a theory of myth and a semiology of commodity-objects and the rituals surrounding them—need not be combined. This, however, is not necessarily the case, for, as we have seen, a study of myth—a study, that is, of (ideological) connotation—simultaneously evokes and necessitates a semiology that takes as its object not merely instances of language
proper but rather all of the things that are shared between persons to which meaning may be attached, whether material or immaterial, including objects, images and rituals.

We should recognise, however, that whilst these latter classes of things may legitimately serve as language-objects, they nevertheless differ significantly from units of language proper. That is to say, Barthes (1977: 32) posits the notion of ‘analogue’ systems of signs, specifically the notion of analogue codes, in contrast to the ‘digital’ system of language, that is in contrast to a “combinatory system of digital units”, i.e., phonemes. This distinction between analogue and digital codes impacts upon the semiological study of objects—its implication is namely that theories which pertain to language proper, particularly Saussure’s seminal theories in this area, may not necessarily be applied verbatim to the worlds of objects, images and rituals. Of course, Barthes’s description of language as a ‘digital’ system should not be confused with the more contemporary use of the term as a reference to electronic and computer systems; rather, Barthes uses the term to refer to the discrete nature of the terms of language proper. However, this usage does not ring entirely true with Saussure’s conception of language, for, in the Saussurean view, language’s organisation of the planes of thought and sound is not devoid of messiness. Accordingly, it is precisely Saussure’s theories with which we must now concern ourselves.

An anatomy of the sign and of linguistic value: context and difference

It was observed, in Chapter One, that each commodity carries a use-value—a capacity to fulfil human needs—and an exchange-value—a socially prescribed worth for which it may be redeemed in relations of exchange. A semiological perspective, however, as we may derive from Barthes’s seminal work, illuminates the fact—if it was not self-evident—that commodity-objects additionally serve a signifying function, i.e., that commodity-objects may carry a meaning (or meanings) beyond their economic value and their utility. We have yet to examine, though, the ways in which such meaning may be constituted. Further, because we now know that it impacts directly upon the world of objects, we must consider the idiosyncrasies and the implications of the sign-form. Accordingly, we must return to the source, so to speak, that is, to the Saussurean explication of the structure of the sign.

Firstly, it must be noted that, for Saussure, “[t]he bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary”, thus that “the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (1974: 67). However, Saussure qualifies this assertion: “[t]he term ‘arbitrary’ should not imply

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4 The term ‘code’ is used liberally, particularly by Barthes and Baudrillard, but is rarely elaborated. It has been defined by John Fiske (in O’Sullivan et al. 1994: 43) as “a system of signs governed by rules agreed (explicitly or implicitly) between the members of the using culture”, and also by David Crystal (in Bullock et al. 1999: 132) as “a term loosely applied to the language of a community or to a particular variety within a language”. We should view the term as synonymous with ‘system of signs’. And it therefore follows that the two may be employed similarly, that is in reference either to specific systems of signs, e.g., the ‘photographic code’, or to the institution or phenomenon of signs in general—it is in the latter sense, it should be noted, i.e., in reference to the entire system of value, that Baudrillard typically employs the term ‘code’, as will be seen below.
that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker” (1974: 68-69); rather, the signifier “is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified” (1974: 69, my emphasis). He instantiates:

The idea of ‘sister’ is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified ‘ox’ has as its signifier b-ö-f on one side of the border and o-k-s (Ochs) on the other. (Saussure 1974: 67-68)

Indeed, it should be recognised that the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifier and signified is the distinguishing characteristic of the sign. Further, this observation is fundamentally related to Saussure’s conception of linguistic value, as we shall see.

We have heretofore employed the word ‘value’ in the Marxian sense, that is in reference to the labour embodied in an object—let us put this aside for a moment and consider instead the Saussurean usage, which is akin to the meaning of a term. To understand the notion of linguistic value, however, we must consider Saussure’s underlying conception of language—but, in turn, to understand this, we must firstly note his views on sound and thought:

There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. Against the floating realm of thought, would sounds by themselves yield predelimited entities? No more so than ideas. Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought; it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit but a plastic substance divided in turn into distinct parts to furnish the signifiers needed by thought. The linguistic fact can therefore be pictured in its totality … as a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas and the equally vague plane of sounds. … The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, has become ordered in the process of its decomposition. (Saussure 1974: 111-112)

The linguistic value of a term may therefore be understood as a delimited fragment of the mass of human thought. Thus also apparent is the reason for the ‘radical’ arbitrariness of signs: there can be no rational, logical or natural association between two realms that are themselves fundamentally amorphous.

We should recall, however, that one cannot delimit a slice of thought—a value—without, in so doing, also delimiting a slice of sound. Saussure offers an analogy:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractedly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology. (1974: 113)
Thus we must consider not merely linguistic values, but also linguistic *units*; values may be understood as slices of thought, units as slices of sound. The latter, however, should not be confused with words, which may constitute more than one unit and which may thus correspond to more than one value. The word ‘rush’, for example, may be either a verb or a noun, respectively meaning *to move quickly* or a quick *movement*, but so too may it refer to a particular variety of marsh plant. Consequently, to “be assured that we are really dealing with a unit, we must be able in comparing a series of sentences in which the same unit occurs to separate the unit from the rest of the context and find in each instance that meaning justifies the delimitation” (Saussure 1974: 104-105). An illustration:

Take the two French phrases *laforsdüvã* (la *force* du vent ‘the *force* of the wind’), and *abudfors* (a bout de *force* ‘exhausted’; literally: ‘at the end of one’s *force*’). In each phrase the same concept coincides with the same phonic slice, *fors*; thus it is certainly a linguistic unit. But in *ilmeforsaparle* (il me *force* a parler ‘he *forces* me to talk’) *fors* has an entirely different meaning: it is therefore another unit. (Saussure 1974: 105)

This example brings to light the fact that a linguistic unit may only be accurately delimited by its context; thus, not merely the unit but also its associated value may only be accurately recognised by way of the context of the former, which is to say that the *meaning of a term is contextually determined*. We should nevertheless appreciate, as does Saussure, that the task of definitively recognising or delimiting linguistic units is fundamentally problematic, i.e., that it is “extremely difficult to disentangle the interplay of units that are found in a sound-chain and to specify the concrete elements on which a language functions” (Saussure 1974: 106). A noun, for example, may have alternate, yet equally acceptable plural forms—the case of ‘simulacrums’ and ‘simulacra’ comes to mind; here the slices of sound differ, but their meanings—their *values*—are identical. Or, not merely words but entire phrases may coincide on the plane of sound, whilst their meanings differ entirely, e.g., ‘you’re bare’ and ‘your bear’. (Simply because writing reveals the differing *values* of these examples, however, we should not view written language as superior to oral language, for writing lacks, among other things, the quality of intonation, as well as space-time specificity—and indeed we will see, in the coming section, the significance of the latter.)

We have thus observed that the linguistic unit is contextually determined. It is necessary, however, to refine this notion—we should recognise that, for Saussure, the delimitation of not merely units but also values is in fact differential, which is to say that it is *based on differences*. For example, we can recognise the signifier ‘cat’ because it is not ‘cap’, ‘cot’ or ‘bat’. Further, we can delimit the signified—the idea of a cat—because it is neither a dog nor a horse. That is to say:

The conceptual side of value is made up solely of relations and differences with respect to the other terms of language, and the same can be said of the material side. The important thing in the word is not the sound alone but the phonic differences that make
it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification.

… [A] segment of language can never in the final analysis be based on anything except its noncoincidence with the rest. (Saussure 1974: 117-118)

Indeed, examples of this phenomenon can be found in systems other than that of language proper:

we speak of the identity of two ‘8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris’ trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything—the locomotive, coaches, personnel—is probably different. Or if a street is demolished, then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains. Why can a street be completely rebuilt and still be the same? Because it does not constitute a purely material entity; it is based on certain conditions that are distinct from the materials that fit the conditions, e.g. its location with respect to other streets. Similarly, what makes the express is its hour of departure, its route, and in general every circumstance that sets it apart from other trains. (Saussure 1974: 108-109, my emphasis)

Values, therefore, like units, are “defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (Saussure 1974: 117), which is to say that “[t]heir most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not” (Saussure 1974: 117). Of course, it is precisely in this way that radical commodities may be distinguished from all other commodity-objects. Moreover, it will later be seen that this differential logic is of strategic significance, particularly with regard to the radicalism of ethical commodities. In sum, the systematic nature of the sign cannot be underestimated; it is only by virtue of the interdependence of all signs that any one sign has meaning. That is to say, it is clear that

to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept is grossly misleading. To define it in this way would isolate the term from its system; it would mean assuming that one can start from the terms and construct the system by adding them together when, on the contrary, it is from the interdependent whole that one must start and through analysis obtain its elements. (Saussure 1974: 113)

Having acknowledged, however, that “[t]he idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it” (Saussure 1974: 120), we should additionally note an immensely important consequence thereof, namely that “the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being affected, solely because a neighbouring term has been modified” (Saussure 1974: 120). On this matter, Saussure offers the following example:

Within the same language, all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally; synonyms like French redouter ‘dread,’ craindre ‘fear,’ and avoir peur ‘be afraid’ have value only through their opposition: if redouter did not exist, all its content would go to its competitors. (1974: 116)

Thus we should conclude, as does Saussure (1974: 118), that “[s]igns function … not through their intrinsic value [which is nought] but through their relative position”.

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Yet, we should also note that whilst both value and the unit are determined negatively—i.e., differentially or, in other words, according to what they are not—it is nevertheless the case that the relationship between one and the other, between signified and signifier, is itself a positive fact:

the statement that everything in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately; when we consider the sign in its totality, we have something that is positive in its own class. … Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact; it is even the sole type of facts that language has, for maintaining the parallelism between the two classes of differences is the distinctive function of the linguistic institution. (Saussure 1974: 120-121)

The observation that signifiers and signifieds are independently devoid of intrinsic value, and that both derive value only from their relative positions in the system, certainly holds true for language proper. We must, however, qualify Saussure’s assertion that “[i]n language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it” (1974: 121, my emphasis). That is to say, as intimated above, what is true for language proper is not entirely true for other semiological systems; we must keep in mind that “the relation between thing signified and [thing] signifying in analogical representation is not ‘arbitrary’ (as it is in language)” (Barthes 1977: 35-36).

**Objects as social discriminants: the sign-object, or the sign-value of the commodity**

Let us now return to the matter of the object. That which escaped Marx’s analysis of the commodity was its quality as a sign, from which, we may speculate, issues much of the contemporary social significance of commodity-objects, even beyond their economic function. Veblen approached such an insight, in some manner, but it was a revelation made fully possible only later, as a result of Saussure’s seminal theories of the structure of language.\(^5\) And whilst it was Barthes, in *Mythologies*, who initially subjected the world of objects to semiological analysis, it is in the early works of Jean Baudrillard that we find an explicit attempt to synthesise the Marxian heritage of critical theory with the conceptual apparatus of semiology (among also those of psychoanalysis, anthropology, etc.\(^6\) In fact, Baudrillard, through his advancement of Saussurean formulations, reconciles, at least in part, the ideas of Marx and Veblen.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) By way of a reference to his own analysis, it might be understood that Saussure brought to the theoretical table not merely the terminological apparatus to describe the phenomenon but also the conceptual apparatus to analyse it: recall that ‘there are no pre-existing ideas’, that ‘thought—a part from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass’, thus that ideas and their expression always emerge in unison.

\(^6\) It cannot be overstated that I am herein dealing predominantly with the earlier works of Baudrillard. Although it is Baudrillard’s later, more extreme work that is most well-known, it is his earlier works which offer the most to a critical theory of the commodity. On vaguely related note, I would argue that it is inaccurate to assume that Baudrillard’s standpoint shifts dramatically across his oeuvre; we should perhaps recognise instead that his position intensifies over time. Indeed, the later, often-abstruse Baudrillard, who is well known (or, rather, who is infamous because he appears unknowable), cannot be properly understood without a knowledge of his earlier works.

\(^7\) Of course, Barthes too drew upon Marx’s work, as will be seen in the next chapter.
It is often held that we live today in a ‘consumer society’—indeed, this notion is not merely sufficiently prolific but also, apparently, sufficiently plausible and compelling as to have become a popular myth itself. But let us, for a moment, examine this idea (or, at least, Baudrillard’s understanding thereof). In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard’s argument is not that consumption has wholly superseded production as the organising logic of our society; rather, he resolutely conserves the essence of Marx’s argument. Specifically, he maintains that our society is “firstly, objectively and decisively a society of production, an order of production, and therefore the site of an economic and political strategy” (1998: 32-33). “But”, he continues, “…there is entangled with that order an order of consumption, which is an order of the manipulation of signs” (1998: 33). And indeed the latter order is both multiplying and intensifying, which is to say that “[m]ore and more basic aspects of our contemporary societies fall under a logic of significations” (Baudrillard 1998: 33).

In the vulgar economic sense, consumption of course constitutes an end, wherein a useful product (a Marxian use-value) is destroyed (thus perfected, completed, *consummated*) under the pretence of satisfying a human need. The Baudrillardian sense of consumption, however, is radically opposed to this: Baudrillard posits that “[a]n accurate theory of objects will not be established upon a theory of needs and their satisfaction, but upon a theory of social prestations and significations” (1981: 30)—this, of course, is strongly reminiscent of Veblen’s position. To illustrate this division between needs and social significations, Baudrillard evokes the example of a bygone people (in spite of the professed risk that inheres in doing so):

Alluding to primitive societies is undoubtedly dangerous—it is nonetheless necessary to recall that originally the consumption of goods (alimentary or sumptuary) does not answer to an individual economy of needs but is a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution. It does not derive from vital necessity or from ‘natural law,’ but rather from a cultural constraint. In summary, it is an institution. Goods and objects must necessarily be produced and exchanged (sometimes in the form of violent destruction) in order that the social hierarchy be manifest. Among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski) the distinction between economic function and sign function is radical: there are two classes of objects upon which two parallel systems are articulated—the *Kula*, a system of symbolic exchange founded upon the circulation, the progressive presentation of bracelets, collars, finery, etc., about which a social system of values and status is organised—and the *Gimwali*, the commerce of primary goods. (Baudrillard 1981: 30)

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8 On the mythical nature of the consumer society itself, see ‘The object of ideology’, in the next chapter.
9 See Chapter Nine for a discussion of Baudrillard’s notion of consumption as *consummation*.
10 Specifically, this is strongly reminiscent of Veblen’s assertion that ‘it is only when taken in a sense far removed from its naïve meaning that consumption of goods can be said to afford the incentive from which accumulation invariably proceeds. The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation’.
11 The results from the Polish social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s fieldwork from the Trobriand Islands is published in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1978). Malinowski is renowned for instituting the social anthropological field of Functionalism, and for founding participant observation in ethnographic fieldwork.
Marx’s concepts of use-value and exchange-value belong to the realm of the latter, that is, to the Gimwali. In the Kula, however, or the Potlatch,12 i.e., in the realm of consumption as Baudrillard defines it, objects come to be ‘sign-objects’, they come to carry ‘sign-exchange value’ (or alternately, and more succinctly, ‘sign value’) — these terms refer namely to the capacity of objects to designate “the being and social rank of their possessor” (Baudrillard 1981: 32).

Consumption, therefore, in Baudrillard’s analysis, is firstly a game of social one-upmanship, as it was for Veblen before him. Indeed, Baudrillard remarks that “Veblen’s work illustrates how the production of a social classification (class distinctions and statutory rivalry) is the fundamental law that arranges and subordinates all the other logics, whether conscious, rational, ideological, moral, etc” (1981: 76).13 This analysis, it should be noted, namely that of consumption as a contest for status, is one that Marx’s idealism could never allow him to reach. We find in Marx the analysis that “in consumption, the product … becomes the direct object and servant of an individual need and satisfies it in use” (Marx 1976b: 16). In other words, as has been said before, in Marx’s view, consumption is the moment in which the object is emancipated from the alienating logic of exchange-value and is restored to the subject as a use-value; consumption thus constitutes, for Marx, a reversal of the abstraction brought about by the logic of the commodity. According to Baudrillard’s analysis, however, this could hardly be further from the truth; far from being a reversal of the effect of the logic of the commodity, consumption is, in essence, an intensification of that logic. And yet it is not the case that use-value does not enter at all into this equation, although any use-value that may be discerned here is not the same as that which was revered by Marx. That is to say, it might be understood that use-value persists in Baudrillard’s analysis, but that it is here a transmuted, adulterated use-value.14 Specifically, Baudrillard (1981: 32-33) posits that we might perceive at the level of each object a conflict between discordant logics, namely those of use-value and sign-value, of the Gimwali and the Kula, of utility and emulation. Yet, for Baudrillard, not merely is consumption firstly a game of social one-upmanship; rather, it is fundamentally a game of one-upmanship. That is to say, a “puritan work ethic” that strives toward the satisfaction of needs is not a logic that is radically opposed to that of emulation; rather, the former naturally complements the latter, or is in any case readily incorporated into it.15 Thus, in Baudrillard’s estimation (after Veblen), use-value becomes nothing more than “a functional discourse that can serve as alibi for the function of invidious distinction” (1981: 32). In other words,

12 Baudrillard refers not merely to the Kula of the Trobriand Islanders but also, and in fact more regularly, to the Potlatch of which Mauss spoke — indeed, the concept of potlatch, unlike that of the Kula, is evoked in Baudrillard’s other works (see, for example, Baudrillard 1998: 44, 46).
13 Baudrillard explicitly acknowledges his theoretical debt to Veblen, citing his work on a number of occasions (e.g., Baudrillard 1981: 31–32; 1998: 157).
14 Of course, this is a false distinction, for the notion of a more basic use-value is more than a little problematic — see ‘The essence of ideology’ in the next chapter.
utility—i.e., functionality—becomes merely “a functional simulacrum (make-believe),
behind which objects would continue to enact their role of social discriminants”
(Baudrillard 1981: 32-33). Or, more concisely: “use value is fundamentally an alibi
for sign exchange value” (Baudrillard 1981: 55).

Further to his analysis of its essential structure, Baudrillard posits that “consumption may indeed be deemed a defining mode of our industrial civilization” (1996: 199). If this is the case, our civilization is in fact characterised, as outlined above, by a world of objects that have been drawn as fodder into a game of emulation, that is into a contest for status which is governed by the logic of signification—objects have become signifiers, differentially capable of signifying their possessor’s status. Yet, we should also recognise here the fundamentally
differential character of the sign-value of objects: recall Saussure’s conception of the
nature of value in the linguistic sign, i.e., that signs are ‘defined not by their positive
content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system’. Likewise,
the sign-value of an object issues not from some intrinsic quality but rather from its
relative position, according to complex schemes of difference (and also according to
what are effectively meta-schemes, i.e., according to especially complex interplays
between ostensibly discrete systems, such as between pecuniary, aesthetic and
functional systems, for example). In sum, like in the Trobriand Islanders’ Kula, there
is, unquestionably, ‘a social system of values and status’ organised around the objects
of contemporary exchange, yet it should also be recognised that today’s contest for
repute is in fact quintessentially systematised.

The advanced capitalist society, wherein almost all aspects of the social have
come subject to the logic of the sign, has been famously labelled, by Guy Debord
(1994), as “the society of the spectacle”.16 In Debord’s analysis, “[t]he spectacle is not
merely a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is
mediated by images” (1994: 12)—indeed, in this vein, he claims that “[a]ll that once
was directly lived has become mere representation” (1994: 12). The Debordian
spectacle, however, describes anything but an unbiased totality of mediating images:
in Debord’s view, the spectacle is “ideology in material form” (1994: 149-154). His
notion of the spectacle, therefore, is, in many respects, a revision of Marx’s notion of
commodity fetishism—in fact, we might summarise Debord’s thesis by way of a
paraphrase of Marx: in the era of the spectacle, it is nothing but the definite social
relation between men themselves which assumes, for them, the fantastic form of a
relation between images. If, however, the notion of the spectacle is indeed to be
understood as a revision of that of commodity fetishism, it should be recognised as a
necessary one, albeit not because Debord’s theoretical formulation is significantly
more advanced than that of Marx, but rather because the sphere of exchange itself, as
well as the social relations that revolve around it, are today more advanced.

16 Debord was the principal theorist of the Situationists, the renowned French left-wing movement of the 1960’s. Baudrillard’s
work owes much to that of Debord, and indeed this is, on occasion, most apparent.
In sum, the logic of consumption comprises some manner of intersection between the world of objects and the realm of language. Moreover, we may understand that consumption is a type of speech; for this reason, the meaning of a radical commodity is not fixed by its producer, and it may thus be drawn, perhaps inevitably, into a differential contest over social status. These insights, however, are not new to us; what we must be concerned with are Debord’s observation that the spectacle is ‘ideology in material form’ and Baudrillard’s notion that use-value is merely the *alibi* of exchange-value. We must, in other words, concern ourselves now with ideological function of the sign-form, but also with the possibility of the survival of oppositional values. Accordingly, we shall review Baudrillard’s distinction between signification and the symbolic.

**Signs versus symbols, or: signification versus the symbolic**

In order to understand Baudrillard’s distinction between signification and the symbolic, we ought to firstly consider the Saussurean view of the same. For Saussure, the symbol is similar to the sign, albeit *motivated*—that is to say, in the symbol, in contrast to the sign, the link between signifier and signified is, for Saussure, *not entirely arbitrary*: 17

One characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot. (Saussure 1974: 68)

Yet, less arbitrary or not, it remains the case that, for Saussure, the symbol is simply a *motivated sign*, i.e., in spite of its apparently lesser arbitrariness, the symbol still conforms to the structure of the sign.

In contrast, Baudrillard employs the term ‘symbol’ not “in the classic semiotic [i.e., Saussurean] sense of an analogical variant of the sign” (Baudrillard 1981: 149n); rather, he “always use[s] the term symbol (the symbolic, symbolic exchange) in opposition to and as a radical alternative to the concept of the sign and of signification” (Baudrillard 1981: 149n). For this reason, ‘the symbolic’ is, in Baudrillard’s analyses, always radically opposed to all systems and values:

Accurately speaking, there is no symbolic ‘value,’ there is only symbolic ‘exchange,’ which defines itself precisely as something distinct from, and beyond value and code. All forms of value (object, commodity or sign) must be negated in order to inaugurate symbolic exchange. This is the radical rupture of the field of value. (Baudrillard 1981: 125)

In contrast to the sign, therefore, the symbol is non-differential, unique. Symbolic exchange thus stands as a radical alternative to relations based upon the commodity and the sign:

17 Saussure’s use of the term ‘symbol’, it might be noted, is in fact antithetical in relation to that of Peirce, for whom the symbol is the most arbitrary of signs.
In symbolic exchange, of which the gift is our most proximate illustration, the object is not an object: it is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons: it is thus not independent as such. It has, properly speaking, neither use value nor (economic) exchange value. … This is the paradox of the gift: it is on the one hand (relatively) arbitrary: it matters little what object is involved. Provided it is given, it can fully signify the relation. On the other hand, once it has been given—and because of this—it is this object and not another. The gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging and the unique moment of the exchange. It is arbitrary, and yet absolutely singular. (Baudrillard 1981: 64)

Having thus distinguished the symbolic from all systems of value, Baudrillard posits four logics that may act upon the world of objects. Or, in other words, Baudrillard states that “it is necessary to distinguish the logic of consumption, which is a logic of the sign and of difference, from several other logics that habitually get entangled with it” (1981: 66). These four logics are namely:

1. A functional logic of use value;
2. An economic logic of exchange value;
3. A logic of symbolic exchange;
4. A logic of sign value. (Baudrillard 1981: 66)

These logics are defined thus:

The first is a logic of practical operations, the second one of equivalence, the third, ambivalence, and the fourth, difference. Or again: a logic of utility, a logic of the market, a logic of the gift, and a logic of status. (Baudrillard 1981: 66) 18

And so, “[o]rganized in accordance with one of the above groupings, the object assumes respectively the status of an instrument, a commodity, a symbol, or a sign” (Baudrillard 1981: 66).

Earlier, by way of Baudrillard’s observation that ‘use value is fundamentally an alibi for sign exchange value’, we glimpsed the way in which discordant logics, specifically those of utility and status, may collide at the level of an individual object. Now, however, we may better distinguish between symbolic exchange and the differential system of status, of signification. To demonstrate the distinction between the symbolic article and the sign-object, and also the manner in which all four of the above diverse logics might ‘habitually get entangled’ in a single object, we may consider the example of a wedding ring. Baudrillard (1981: 66) also evokes the example of a wedding ring, yet this may in fact serve as a better example if we hypothesise its loss and hence deliberate the possibility (or necessity) of its

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18 Baudrillard talks, in places, of the ‘logic of symbolic exchange’ (as here, but also, for example, Baudrillard 1981: 123 ff.). However, when presented with a logic, it seems reasonable to presume that one may draw conclusions regarding that which is, according to the given logic, logical and illogical, i.e., rational and irrational, correct and incorrect, good and bad—thus, in relation to a logic, one is always presented with different values. Or, in other words, it might be argued that a logic always constitutes a foundation of values. Thus, it is perhaps inappropriate to associate the symbolic with these codes of value, and to speak of a ‘logic’ of symbolic exchange, for symbolic exchange is that which always and unequivocally opposes value: symbolic exchange is that which is in fact alogical. Baudrillard does, however, indeed separate symbolic exchange from all fields of value, as will be seen.
replacement. The practical utility of the wedding ring, its use-value, is of course negligible. In its functional capacity, therefore, it need not be replaced. Its (economic) exchange-value, however, is likely significant. Further, given the principally ostentatious character of a ring, its sign-value would likely correspond to its exchange-value. If it is lost, it constitutes, needless to say, a pecuniary shortfall, but, as a sign-value, it may be restored without consequence (finances permitting, of course). That is to say, in its capacity as a signifier of status, the ring may in fact be substituted by any other of equivalent economic value. In its symbolic capacity, however, the ring cannot be replaced, not even by an identical item purchased from the same store, not at any price. As an article that marks the union of two people, the ring is unique, irreplaceable, absolutely singular.\(^{19}\)

Baudrillard posits that the symbolic quality of the object, its significance as the positive manifestation of a relation between persons, is destroyed by the logics of commodity and sign. He observes that, in symbolic exchange, the object is not an object; it is not independent, not autonomous. That is to say, because it is ‘inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged’, the object-qua-symbolic-fulcrum abolishes itself: “the objects involved in reciprocal exchange, whose uninterrupted circulation establishes social relationships, i.e., social meaning, annihilate themselves in this continual exchange without assuming any value of their own” (Baudrillard 1981: 125). However, “[o]nce symbolic exchange is broken,” states Baudrillard, “this same material is abstracted into utility value, commercial value, statutory value. The symbolic is transformed into the instrumental, either commodity or sign” (1981: 125). Or, in other words:

from the (theoretically isolatable) moment when the exchange is no longer purely transitive, when the object (the material of exchange) is immediately presented as such, … it is reified into a sign. Instead of abolishing itself in the relation that it establishes, and thus assuming symbolic value (as in the example of the gift), the object becomes autonomous, intransitive, opaque, and so begins to signify the abolition of the relationship. (Baudrillard 1981: 65, my emphasis)

Baudrillard’s formulation of the symbolic therefore explicates and completes Marx’s conception of commodity fetishism: the commodity is in fact fetishised because it is the signifier of a relationship lost. Indeed, we may understand that Marx himself initially charted the evolution from symbolic objects to signifying objects (albeit not in such terms, of course), for it is the loss of a ‘definite social relationship’ that lies at the heart of his fetishism thesis: ‘it is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes for them the fantastic form of a relation between things’. This is also apparent in his analysis of the fetishisation of money. Money is

\(^{19}\) This example of the wedding ring as an object that evokes the symbolic is certainly useful, but it is also far from perfect. The institution of marriage is a wholly social convention; for this reason, the meaning with which the wedding ring is imbued is in fact not singular after all. In Baudrillard’s later writings, the symbolic is ascribed with a more extreme meaning, specifically, with a thoroughgoing asociality, of which a mere glimpse has been given thus far—we will, however, pursue this topic in the coming chapters.
namely the definitive form of value, the definitive species, so to speak, of the commodity. Accordingly, money is nothing more than concrete human relationships thrice removed; it is ‘the dead pledge of society’:

the economists themselves say that people place in a thing (money) the faith which they do not place in each other. But why do they have faith in the thing? Obviously only because that thing is an objectified relation between persons; because it is objectified exchange value, and exchange value is nothing more than a mutual relation between people’s productive activities. Every other collateral may serve the holder directly in that function: money serves him only as the ‘dead pledge of society’, but it serves as such only because of its social (symbolic) property; and it can have a social property only because individuals have alienated their own social relationship from themselves so that it takes the form of a thing. (Marx 1973: 160)

The notion of the loss of symbolic exchange also sheds additional light on the phenomena of advertising and choice. Baudrillard remarks:

Objects are always sold; only advertising is offered gratis. The mechanism of advertising thus subtly renews links with archaic rituals of giving, of offering presents…. Both choice and advertising serve to transform a purely commercial relationship into a personal one. (Baudrillard 1996: 171-172)

Yet, as evidenced by its contemporary ascendance, branding should be included alongside advertising and choice as one of those mechanisms which serves to (ostensibly) personalise relationships that are otherwise purely commercial. In fact, branding might be recognised as the contemporary apotheosis of these mechanisms. Not only may the corporate brand—manifest as brand name, logo, etc.—serve as a signifier of pecuniary value, as we contemplated in the previous chapter, but so too is it the ersatz of a relationship lost. That is to say, through branding, that symbolic relationship from which persons are alienated by the onset of the commodity-form is apparently restored. However, this is not a benign restoration: what is presented as a genuine equivalent in fact only resembles—simulates—that which it replaces.21 Through branding, the relationship lost is recuperated as a productive force, wholly subservient at once to the logics of commodity and sign. For this reason, it may be better to speak today not of the fetishism of commodities, but rather of the fetishism of brands.

In summary, the object as sign or commodity is, at base, irredeemably an object, by virtue of that autonomy which is at once both constitutive of and the consequence of its very being as sign-value or exchange-value. The sign-object or commodity can never be one with the subject; it is always, in some measure, public property. It is, in Marxian terms, radically alienated from the subject; it is forever

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20 What a strange and happy coincidence that Marx would use, in this passage, the term ‘symbolic’ (albeit parenthetically, admittedly) in much the same sense as Baudrillard’s later usage.

21 Cf. Barthes’s observation that “myth is speech stolen and restored. Only, speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was stolen: when it was brought back, it was not put exactly in its place” (1973: 125).
confined to relate only to other objects, hence it can never be the locus of an untainted symbolic exchange. And thus the proper object of consumption is reconfirmed:

The object-become-sign no longer gathers its meaning in the concrete relationship between two people. It assumes its meaning in its differential relation to other signs. …

Thus, only where objects are autonomized as differential signs and thereby rendered systematizable can one speak of consumption and of objects of consumption. (Baudrillard 1981: 66)

In this way, not only as economic articles but also as meaningful things (sign-objects), commodities, by their very form, represent an affront to human relations. In Baudrillarian terms, the various codes of value (those of exchange-value and sign-value, but also of use-value) “are all joined in the single form of political economy which is opposed, as a whole, to symbolic exchange” (Baudrillard 1981: 125). However, we are yet to contemplate Baudrillard’s conception of the symbolic in its entirety, and his writings on this topic are of marked importance, specifically insofar as they bear upon the question of the theoretical foundation from which radical commodities might be understood (namely that question which has been heretofore discussed in terms of the opposition between the discordant positions of Marx and Veblen). Thus, let me now recount, in greater detail, Baudrillard’s conception of the symbolic.

Baudrillard (1981: 126-129) offers a number of formulae to describe the radical opposition of symbolic exchange to all codes of value; it is worth reviewing these. Firstly, we have that wherein “sign value [or ‘sign exchange value’, hence ‘SgEV’] is to symbolic exchange what exchange value (economic) is to use value” (Baudrillard 1981: 126):

\[
\frac{SgEV}{SbE} = \frac{EcEV}{UV}
\]

Yet, if the first is to be coherent, Baudrillard observes that “[n]ot only must sign value be to symbolic value what exchange value is to use value (the relation posited above), but also sign value must be to exchange value what symbolic exchange is to use value” (1981: 127). Accordingly, the first relation is transposed:

\[
\frac{SgEV}{EcEV} = \frac{SbE}{UV}
\]

Neither of these formulae, however, are coherent, “all the more so in that the integration of symbolic exchange as a factor homogeneous to the others in the relation does not take into account what has been posited: that the symbolic is not a value (i.e., not positive, autonomous, measurable or codifiable)” (Baudrillard 1981: 127); recall that the symbolic is instead “the ambivalence (positive and negative) of personal exchange—and as such it is radically opposed to all values” (Baudrillard 1981: 127). Consequently, Baudrillard posits that “[i]n place of the sign as global value, it is necessary to make its constituent elements, the signifier and the signified, appear”
Thus, “the definitive correlation between sign form and commodity form is established [when] … exchange value is to use value what the signifier is to the signified” (Baudrillard 1981: 127, my emphasis):

\[
\frac{EcEV}{UV} = \frac{Sr}{Sd}
\]

Baudrillard accordingly states:

this homologous relation (this time coherent) describes the field of general political economy. [However, the] homologous relation being saturated, symbolic exchange finds itself expelled from the field of value (or the field of general political economy). This corresponds to the radical definition as the alternative to and transgression of value. (1981: 127-128)

Thus follows Baudrillard’s final formulation (1981: 128), wherein symbolic exchange is indeed wholly opposed to the field of value, that is, to the field of political economy:

\[
\frac{EcEV}{UV} = \frac{Sr}{Sd} / SbE \text{ (symbolic exchange)}
\]

Or, alternately:

General Political Economy / Symbolic Exchange

In Baudrillard’s view, therefore, there exists “a single great opposition between the whole field of value (where the process of material production [commodity form] and the process of sign production [sign form] are articulated through the same systematic logic) and the field of non-value, of symbolic exchange” (1981: 128).

The remark that the commodity-form and the sign-form are ‘articulated through the same systematic logic’ brings to the fore another significant distinction—or, rather, an indistinction—that we should briefly consider. Specifically, whilst it is possible to analytically distinguish the commodity (the object understood in terms of its exchange-value) from the sign-object (the object understood in terms of its sign-value), it is nigh on impossible to make this distinction in practice. In other words, the distinction between the commodity and the sign-object is effectively moot, since the object, upon becoming subject to the (social) logic of commodity exchange, invariably becomes subject, in the same moment, to the logic of sign exchange also. Indeed, in spite of the fact that he occasionally draws an analytic distinction between the sign-object and the commodity, Baudrillard himself recognises that “[t]oday consumption … defines precisely the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and where signs (culture) are produced as commodities” (1981: 147).

The illusion of equality
I indicated above that this chapter would demonstrate the significance of the sign-function of objects as regards the ideology of consumer capitalism; having
contemplated the structure of the sign and the sign-function of objects, this is a matter that we may presently consider.

Recall Baudrillard’s assertion that ‘more and more basic aspects of our contemporary societies fall under a logic of significations’; this observation is laden with implications. Under the governance of the apparently abstract logic of signification, profound (symbolic) oppositions are dissolved: as the logic of exchange-value facilitates the exchange of differentially useful things, i.e., things which could otherwise never confront one another, so the all-encompassing logic of the sign dissolves those boundaries which demarcate otherwise antithetical aspects of the social. Baudrillard (1996: 137-138) offers an illustration of the relationship between objects and institutions, between objects and the social logic:

In the eighteenth century there was simply no relationship between a ‘Louis XV’ table and a peasant’s table: there was an unbridgeable gulf between the two types of object, just as there was between the two corresponding social classes. No single cultural system embraced them both. … The social order was what gave objects their standing.

Today, however, no object (indeed, no thing/nothing) escapes the code of signification. The capitalist mode of exchange provided, by way of the commodity-form, an ostensibly level ground for relations between all persons, which would not have been possible under preceding social formations. Under no circumstance, for example, may a feudal lord and his serf have entered an exchange on equal terms; under capitalism, however, all persons bring their labour to market according to an apparently just law of equivalence, that is, according to the impartial logic of the commodity. Further, as regards consumption, there is no law that prohibits both worker and employer from purchasing the same goods, thus all persons are accorded the same right to eminence, or, rather, to the signifiers of eminence—indeed, this image of democracy is the very alibi of consumer capitalism. Under no circumstances could a peasant of the eighteenth century have come to possess a ‘Louis XV’ table; today, however, by decree of the logic of consumption, such a table may be purchased by anyone, it may be arrested as a sign-value by all—such is the effective birthright of all children of a consumer society.

Thus, consumer capitalism is everywhere characterised by the image of democracy. The liberation granted by the order of consumption, however, is a specious liberation, with regard to which we may make, after Baudrillard, two significant and interrelated observations. Firstly, a true equality is structurally precluded by the logic of consumption—the illusion of democracy is merely the alibi of an underlying political strategy. Secondly, this political strategy lies namely in the fact that all apparent liberation under the regime of consumption is merely the liberation—the mobilisation—of productive forces; the so-called democracy of consumption is therefore a form of subjugation disguised as liberation. In short, freedom in a consumer society entails merely a freedom to consume.
As regards the first point, Baudrillard (1996: 137-155) posits that there are, within the system of objects, two polar classes, namely the model and the series. The distinction between model objects and serial objects is, at base, an opposition between originals and copies—Baudrillard here preserves a Marxian focus on class difference, for the model is the reserve of an elite, to which all others aspire (but which they cannot, of course, ever obtain):

The fact is that the nuance (within a unity) has come to characterize the model, while difference (within uniformity) has come to characterize the series. Nuances in this sense are infinite in number, being emphases ever susceptible of reinvention in accordance with an open-ended syntax. Differences are finite in number, being the result of systematic variations on a single paradigm. … In sum, the series offers the immense majority of people a restricted range of choices, while a tiny majority enjoy access to the model and its infinite nuances. … We are thus indeed clearly dealing with class status and class distinctions. (Baudrillard 1996: 148-149)

Once more, we might appeal to the world of fashion: the distinction between model object and serial object can be found in its purest form in the realm of apparel, namely in the distinction between haute couture and ready-to-wear garments. And yet, the distinction between models and series is at once also all-but-void, because “every single object claims model status” (Baudrillard 1996: 141). Indeed, this is essential to the ideology of the consumer society, for if there was not something of the model in every object, the egalitarian appearance of consumption would collapse—that is to say, whilst there exists a practical reality (a diversity of incomes, corresponding to a diversity of established social standings) that prevents a true equality of persons before exchange-value, and therefore also before sign-value, consumption promises to everyone equally the chance of attaining the model-object, and so this potentiality which is promised must be corroborated by the partial fulfilment, in every object, of the desire for the model. For this reason, “every object is a model, yet at the same time there are no more models. What we are left with in the end are successive limited series, a disjointed transition to ever more restricted series based on ever more minute and ever more specific differences” (Baudrillard 1996: 142).

Therefore, the differential game of status that precisely constitutes the order of consumption is both founded upon and prevails by way of a paradox, namely that of a distinction between model and series which is at once all-too-real and unequivocally null. The model and the series are reified and counterposed, and the space between the two is quintessentially ideological; between these ethereal poles, and therefore by way of them, class divisions are preserved. And yet, because the model is always almost within reach, the illusion of egalitarianism abounds. This image of opportunity, however, is precisely nothing more than an illusion, for the model is intrinsically unattainable—it is that which can never be caught—and this very unattainability

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22 In other words, “the consumer objects which we (think that we) want in order to complete our being always refer to further objects in an unending series” (Lury 2004: 130).
results not in that much-promised equality but rather in an always-invidious stasis, or, rather, in an insurmountable inertia that masquerades as perpetual progress. If the model could in fact ever be attained, there would be some truth in the idea of democracy through consumption. But, since it is nothing more than an ideological chimaera, the model is precisely that mechanism through which the preservation of class divisions is disguised as the abolition thereof; thus, the idea of the model is fundamental to the system of consumption:

The possession of objects frees us only as possessors, and always refers us back to the infinite freedom to possess more objects: the only progression possible here is up the ladder of objects, but this is a ladder that leads nowhere, being itself responsible for nourishing the inaccessible abstraction of the model. For the model is basically merely an idea, that is, a transcendence internal to the system—and the system can continue in its forward flight indefinitely. (Baudrillard 1996: 154)

This indefinite forward flight, this frenetic quest for something which is, by definition, beyond reach, constitutes precisely the phenomenon-qua-institution that is fashion (which itself is bolstered by the institution of advertising), upon which converges much of what has been hitherto said regarding consumption:

The formal logic of fashion imposes an increased mobility on all the distinctive social signs. Does this formal mobility of signs correspond to a real mobility in social structures (professional, political, cultural)? Certainly not. Fashion—and more broadly, consumption, which is inseparable from fashion—masks a profound social inertia. It itself is a factor of social inertia, insofar as the demand for real social mobility frolics and loses itself in fashion, in the sudden and often cyclical changes of objects, clothes and ideas. And to the illusion of change is added the illusion of democracy (which is similar but under another aspect). The constraint of the transitoriness of fashion is claimed to eliminate the possibility of inheriting distinctive signs; it is reputed to return the whole world to a position of equal opportunities at each instant of the cycle. … Now, this is quite obviously false: fashion, like mass culture, speaks to all in order to better return each one to his place. It is one of those institutions that best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination, establishing it under the pretense of abolishing it. It wishes to be beyond social logic, a kind of second nature: in fact, it is entirely governed by the social strategy of class. (Baudrillard 1981: 50-51)

Or, in other words, the “accelerated traffic (circulation) [of objects] in the name of fashion quickly comes to signify and to present a social mobility that does not really exist” (Baudrillard 1981: 50)—this observation bears out what has been said above, namely that a political strategy, a strategy of power, underlies the significatory logic of consumption.

We have thus seen that the ostensible democracy of consumption is in fact no democracy at all; let us now consider the second of the points broached at the beginning of this section, namely the observation that all ostensible liberation under the regime of consumption is merely a mobilisation of productive forces. On this matter, Baudrillard (1981: 85) observes:
It is necessary to … define consumption not only structurally as a system of exchange and of signs, but strategically as a mechanism of power. … In this system, the ‘liberation’ of needs, of consumers, of women, of the young, the body, etc., is always really the mobilization of needs, consumers, the body…. It is never an explosive liberation, but a controlled emancipation, a mobilization whose end is competitive exploitation.

With this in mind, we may take a highly sceptical view of many so-called liberations and of the ostensible equalities thereby established (this is, of course, a cursory and incomprehensive inventory): in the wake of discrimination, women, homosexuals, any number of racial minorities, etc. (in short, all who were once ostracised by the system but who are today embraced by it), are emancipated as new market sectors, mobilised as a new consumptive power, thus as new productive forces.\(^{23}\) In this way, “consumption, with its false social appearance, veils the true political strategy, and is thus one of the essential elements of this strategy” (Baudrillard 1981: 61). Indeed, this strategy of incorporation disguised as liberation has characterised capitalism since its nascence: recall that, by virtue of the reified logic of the commodity-form, every person is ‘free’ to take his or her labour to market, thus every person’s innate capacity to work is freed as a productive force.

In summary: the world of objects, as the symbolic materialisation of incontestable class standings, was once (in feudal or patriarchal times, for example) exclusively presided over by the ruling class(es); today, however, the world of objects is systematised, there is a contest for objects, and the logic of consumption encourages all persons to participate in this contest—it promises the possibility of beating the institution of class at its own game. And yet, in the Baudrillardian view, the order of consumption is all the while double-crossing the consumer. Full of hope, buoyed by the promise of equality before the sign (that is by the possibility, in effect, of upward mobility), the consumer buys into the game—indeed, literally—but what results is merely the reinforcement of class divisions and the extortion of new productive forces. Thus, the system of exploitation-through-abstraction that evolved with capitalist production approaches perfection in the consumer society, because, “[t]hanks to consumption, the system not only succeeds in exploiting people by force, but in making them participate in its multiplied survival” (Baudrillard 1981: 200).

The ‘liberation’ of the individual

We focussed, in the previous section, upon that promise of democracy, of classlessness, which is fundamental to the order of consumption. The system’s greatest coup, however, is perhaps to be found not in the liberation of once-excluded groups, but rather where it acts upon a less tangible target, that is, with the ostensible

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\(^{23}\) Freedom in a consumer society entails not merely the freedom to consume but also the freedom to be consumed. That is to say, the system may give and take equally. Both, however, are thoroughly exploitative, as exemplified by corporate America’s incorporation of African-American culture. “Over the past decade, young black men in American inner cities have been the market most aggressively mined by the brandmasters as a source of borrowed ‘meaning’ and identity” (Klein 2001a: 73).
liberation of ‘the individual’. Thus, the consumer society promises freedom both objective and subjective, so to speak. On the one hand, the consumer society promises an absence of class divisions; on the other, consequently, or at least correspondingly, a thoroughgoing personal freedom is promised—specifically, an unfettered opportunity for self-realisation is assured. The individual who is offered fulfilment through the system of consumption, however, is nothing but a product of the same; “[t]he very concept of the individual is the product of [the] general system of exchange” (Baudrillard 1981: 147). To be precise, the notion of the emancipated individual self that may be realised through consumption is nothing other than the pseudo-liberation of the subject as a productive force: ‘the individual’ is merely the subject worked over, abstracted, reified and quantified by the logic of capital.

The mechanism that effects the reification and the subsequent incorporation of the individual, i.e., that which effectively produces the individual, and which also, incidentally, produces the illusion of democracy, is choice:

No object is proposed to the consumer as a single variety. We may not be granted the material means to buy it, but what our industrial society always offers us ‘a priori’, as a kind of collective grace and as the mark of a formal freedom, is choice. This availability of the object is the foundation of ‘personalization’: only if the buyer is offered a whole range of choices can he transcend the strict necessity of his purchase and commit himself personally to something beyond it. Indeed, we no longer even have the option of not choosing, of buying an object of the sole grounds of its utility, for no object these days is offered for sale on such a ‘zero-level’ basis. (Baudrillard 1996: 141)

In this way, because we are offered choices in consumption, we feel able to truly express ourselves, to truly find ourselves. And yet, one is not free to not choose, for any attempt at non-participation in the differential system of consumption itself bears sign-value, by way of which one is again assimilated into the social order. Thus, again, a strategy of incorporation is disguised as a privilege, as a benefit:

Our freedom to choose causes us to participate in a cultural system willy-nilly. It follows that the choice in question is a specious one: to experience it as freedom is simply to be less sensible of the fact that it is imposed upon us as such, and that through it society as a whole is likewise imposed upon us. Choosing one car over another may perhaps personalize your choice, but the most important thing about the fact of choosing is that it assigns you a place in the overall economic order. … Clearly ‘personalization’, far from being a mere advertising ploy, is actually a basic ideological concept of a society which ‘personalizes’ objects and beliefs solely in order to integrate persons more effectively. (Baudrillard 1996: 141)

24 It is in this way—specifically, through their reduction to mere signs of resistance—that oppositional movements or ‘counter-cultures’, such as, perhaps most famously, the punk or hippy movements, are incorporated into the system, the spectacle, the code. Unsurprisingly, this observation carries considerable implications as regards radical commodities; accordingly, I discuss this matter at length in Chapter Nine.
The expression of individuality, therefore, is in fact the apotheosis of conformity. Further, the choice offered by consumption is specious not merely because it is forced upon us; so too is it hollow because of the essential sameness of what is on offer. That is to say, the options presented to the consumer are not genuinely diverse; rather, they are set apart merely by what Baudrillard (1996: 141–143) describes as “marginal” or “inessential” differences. For example:

The sole way to personalize cars is for the manufacturer to take a serially produced chassis, a serially produced engine, then change a few external characteristics or add a couple of accessory features. A car cannot be personalized in its essence as a technical object, but only in its inessential aspects. (Baudrillard 1996: 142)

And indeed no object escapes this logic—recall that no object is offered on a ‘zero-level’ basis—for even “[t]he most insignificant object must be marked off by some distinguishing feature—a colour, an accessory, a detail of one sort or another” (Baudrillard 1996: 141–142). Moreover, these inessential differences are precisely the fodder of sign-value, and, to reiterate, it is through these inessential differences, by way of which one may apparently personalize one’s engagement with the system of objects, that consumption masquerades at once as the method and as the site of the realisation of the self. In light of this analysis, we might conclude that a tactical consumption, as proposed by de Certeau, in fact plays straight into the system’s hand, so to speak.

We have therefore seen that the oft-celebrated choice offered by the consumer society may be understood, after Baudrillard, as a fallacy in two regards: on the one hand, this is a system of choices that we do not opt into but which is instead imposed upon us; on the other hand, the options therein from which we may choose are not genuine alternatives but are instead only superficially different. Yet, the true political consequence of this system of differentiated objects lies not simply in the fact that two consumers receive essentially identical products whilst under the impression that they are purchasing comparatively unique items. Rather, the menacing implication of this simpler observation is that the same schema applies also to society as a whole. In order to appreciate this, we might distinguish two types of social difference, which, in the absence of any better terms, might be labelled surface differences and structural differences. At the very foundation of the consumer society is the promise that its unfettered wealth of options on the surface—by way of which one may ostensibly realise one’s true self—issues from or reflects an unprecedented equality at the structural level. That is to say, at the heart of consumer capitalism is the claim that historically unbridgeable class differences have been abolished by way of a freedom of choice in consumption. Because of this myth, as Baudrillard has noted, we willingly participate in the system’s reproduction, and indeed in its growth. This myth

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Of course, the system of branding is also complicit in this ruse, as are the laws pertaining thereto. As Lury observes, “trade mark law is one of the mechanisms by which the consumer’s ability to exercise choice—in anything more than a restricted sense of selection from pre-given options—is now more than ever under the control of global corporations” (2004: 128).
is the apotheosis of the ideology of the consumer society. Of course, the reality of the consumer society is the antithesis of its pretence. Its true nature comprises not a structural equality that is reflected in significant and diverse prospects at the surface; rather, feigned differences at the surface disguise an unmitigated structural inequality—or, as Stuart Ewen (1988: 269) observes, “[b]rief shows of flexibility at the surface mask intransigence at the core”.

To reiterate, it is the implicit, ideological claim of the system of consumption that insurmountable social differences, principally that of class, have been deposed and replaced by a multitude of tractable differences. That is to say, the consumer society’s proclamation—and alibi—is that a manipulable system of signs has replaced an incontrovertible social order. It is not that the system of consumption is without differences; rather, it is proclaimed, this is a system wherein differences do exist (even the differential system of status is admitted), yet these are apparently conquerable differences. However, the following distinction may be made: whilst differences apparently abound in the realm of consumption, this is a system built not on real differences but on differentiation. It is a system of manufactured differences (i.e., ‘inessential’ differences), a system characterised not by genuine freedom but by freed signifiers. What abound in the consumer society are merely the signs of democracy. The consumer is never truly granted the power or opportunity to overcome any social boundary (yet, such an ability is precisely what is implicitly promised); rather, what may be acted upon are merely the unhinged signifiers of social difference, which no longer correspond to any actual—and thus actually conquerable—differences. In this way, a plethora of inessential differences veils an insidious sameness, and specifically an unchanged class structure. As Gerry Gill observes,

Baudrillard sees the code of consumer objects not just as a medium for marking difference but also as a mask for essential differences. The emergence of a seamless hierarchy of objects and life styles destroys the appearance of formal social barriers and the sense of qualitative social inequalities…. (1984: 65)

Or, in other words again, a structure of fundamental differences carries on unscathed, thriving whilst concealed behind a system of manipulable but ultimately insubstantial differences, that is, behind the image of its absence.

**Conclusion**

The notion that ‘consumption is a type of speech’ would likely be common knowledge for most citizens of the consumer society—although probably not in so many words. It is, however, a notion for which we have, in this chapter, established a theoretical foundation. Furthermore, whilst we were able to derive, from Veblen’s work, an elementary sense of the social function of objects understood in this way, we have now established that consumption constitutes a variety of speech whose topic of conversation, as it were, may reach beyond pecuniary one-upmanship. Accordingly, and most importantly, if a diversity of meanings is discernable in the realm of commodity-objects, such messages as Naomi Klein’s condemnations of
corporatisation and Rage Against The Machine’s calls to ‘take the power back’ might indeed be legitimately propagated by commodified means.

Yet, the soundness of a revolutionary sentiment expressed by way of commodities is not so easily ascertained. Baudrillard has argued that the contemporary system of sign-objects, in its entirety, marks the abolition of *symbolic* relations between persons. Moreover, he has shown—compellingly—that the diversity characteristic of the consumer society in fact serves an entirely ideological function. Specifically, we have derived from his work the insight that that promise of freedom which underlies the institution of *choice* is also the foundational myth of the consumer society itself, i.e., its *ideological premise*. The extent of the interrelationship between the logic of the commodity and that of the sign, however, and the particular significance of this interrelationship as regards the capitalist ideology, runs still deeper than we have thus far seen. The problem of the radical commodity has thus become rather more complex. In order to appreciate the extent of this problem, we must continue to pursue the question of ideology.
4. The Commodity as an Ideological Object

There can be no mistaking the fact that the question of ideology is tremendously important as regards the analysis of the world of commodities—as Baudrillard has observed, “the description of the system of objects cannot be divorced from a critique of that system’s practical ideology” (1996: 10). The question of ideology likewise holds momentous ramifications as regards the matter of radical commodities. Specifically, in keeping with what I have said before, if it is deemed that, through their very form, all commodity-objects reproduce the capitalist ideology without exception, the notion of a radical commodity in fact becomes radically contradictory. Such an object would, in other words, be impossible. This, however, is not the end of the matter; although it is a topic that received some attention in the previous chapter, we must seek to better understand the capitalist ideology, as well as the extent to which it is entrenched in the structure of the system of objects.

As will be seen, regarding the question of ideology, the writings of Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard again have much to offer. Baudrillard’s work, in particular, pushes the analysis of ideology to its extreme. This course of inquiry will impact not merely upon our understanding of the contemporary capitalist system, but also upon the question of the theoretical foundation from which a radical politics might today issue. Our discussions in this chapter will therefore hold lasting implications as regards the theoretical framework upon which an understanding of radical commodities might be founded.

The object of ideology

It might be recalled that Barthes’s *Mythologies* is, professedly, ‘an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass-culture’. Our review of *Mythologies*, however, was concerned principally with Barthes’s analysis of the function of myth as a ‘second-order semiological system’ and, by reduction, with his recognition of the capacity of objects to carry meaning. Accordingly, that review did not comprise a proper contemplation of the *ideological* character of myth, specifically, a contemplation of the role played by myth in the reproduction of the capitalist ideology. It is presently necessary to rectify this deficiency.

We have seen that ‘myth is a type of speech’. Yet, further to this, and in reference to its ideological character, Barthes observes that “myth is experienced as innocent speech” (1973: 131). Regarding this, he explicates:

what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts:
myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system. (Barthes 1973: 131)

This observation may be better appreciated by way of a brief appeal to Saussure, who discerned in the general public a “superficial notion” of language (1974: 16). Specifically, Saussure observed that “[s]ome people regard language … as a naming-process only—a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names” (1974: 65). It is precisely this popular misconception which myth exploits (albeit at the level of connotation, of course, rather than at that of denotation), thereby naturalising the relationship between the mythical signifier (the ‘form’) and the mythical signified (the ‘concept’) (see Barthes 1973: 117). Hence, what characterises myth is the fact that historically contingent significations therein come to appear as universal. Or, in other words, “[w]e reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (Barthes 1973: 129).

An identical tendency toward dehistoricisation is apparent in Barthes’s conception of the capitalist (a.k.a. bourgeois) ideology. Here, however, this tendency is manifest in a process (or strategy) of ex-nomination:

as an economic fact, the bourgeoisie is named without any difficulty: capitalism is openly professed. As a political fact, the bourgeoisie has some difficulty in acknowledging itself: there are no ‘bourgeois’ parties in the Chamber. As an ideological fact, it completely disappears: the bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man. … [I]t makes its status undergo a real ex-nominating operation: the bourgeoisie is defined as the social class which does not want to be named. (Barthes 1973: 138)

The implications of this ex-nomination are twofold. On the one hand, it is dehistoricising: it might be understood that anything which can be named can also be seen in its historical context and as an historical contingency; conversely, that which goes unnamed comes to appear as natural, as essential, and anything which is taken as such is of course outside of history, thus impervious to supersession and revolution—in other words, eternal. On the other hand, this resultant appearance of essentiality camouflages the wholly political and indeed exploitative motivation that underlies the spread and prolongation of bourgeois values and institutions. Therefore, this ex-nomination precisely facilitates the ‘progress’ of the bourgeois ideology and of bourgeois social institutions. Consider, for example, the following anecdote:

the big wedding of the bourgeoisie, which originates in a class ritual (the display and consumption of wealth), can bear no relation to the economic status of the lower middle-class: but through the press, the news, and literature, it slowly becomes the very norm as dreamed, though not actually lived, of the petit-bourgeois couple. … By spreading its representations over a whole catalogue of collective images for petit-bourgeois use, the bourgeoisie countenances the illusory lack of differentiation of the social classes: it is as from the moment when a typist earning twenty pounds a month recognizes herself in the big wedding of the bourgeoisie that bourgeois ex-nomination achieves its full effect. (Barthes 1973: 141)
In other words, when the typist recognises herself in the big wedding of the bourgeoisie, a ritual that is entirely economically contingent—i.e., class-contingent—emerges as the ‘natural’ paradigm to which all must aspire. Yet, so too does the big wedding appear as the **entitlement** of all; capitalism’s promise of equality is thus reified in the typist’s fantasy. Of course, this is a promise that can never be properly fulfilled; consequently, it serves to reinforce class differences under the guise of abolishing them (recall the previous chapter’s discussions). And so it is apparent:

> The flight from the name ‘bourgeois’ is not therefore an illusory, accidental, secondary, natural or insignificant phenomenon: it is the bourgeois ideology itself, the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature. (Barthes 1973: 141)

In this way, the correlation between myth and the capitalist ideology becomes clear:

> Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology. If our society is objectively the privileged field of mythical significations, it is because formally myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society…. (Barthes 1973: 142)

Myths therefore perpetuate the ideology of consumer capitalism; indeed, they *eternalise* it, “[f]or the very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy of possessions” (Barthes 1973: 155).  

Yet, whilst myth may be the ideal instrument of the capitalist ideology, the commodity must certainly be the ideal vessel of myth. Barthes remarks that “just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name ‘bourgeois’, myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (1973: 142). The parity between myth and the commodity lies in the fact that such a loss of the historical quality of things is also entirely characteristic of the commodity-form, particularly given its present-day consummation by the institution of advertising. Specifically, material things today appear not as *products* of labour, but rather as pure *objects* that have materialised, as if out of nowhere. Regarding this distinction between products and objects, Baudrillard has remarked:

> With the advent of industrial society the division of labour severs labour from its product. Advertising adds the finishing touch to this development by creating a radical split, at the moment of purchase, between *products* and consumer *goods*; by interpolating a vast maternal image between labour and the products of labour, it causes that *product* no longer to be viewed as such (complete with its history, and so on), but purely and simply as a good, as an *object*. (1996: 175)

Thus, the commodity-form is anything but an innocuous means of organising relations of exchange; rather, it is quintessentially ideological. (This, however, should come as no surprise.) That is to say, by virtue of its own dehistoricising tendency,
such that every commodity-object is divorced from its material history, it might be recognised that the commodity-form represents the archetypal manifestation of the capitalist ideology. Needless to say, this analysis has immense consequences as regards the idea of a radical commodity: if the commodity-form is, in every sense, a mechanism of the capitalist ideology, how could any commodity-object ever legitimately advance a politics that in some measure opposes that ideology?

The ideological basis of needs and utility

We have seen that “[b]ourgeois ideology continuously transforms the products of history into essential types” (Barthes 1973: 155), yet the scope of this tendency is frequently underestimated. As we know, Marx held that “[t]he commodity is, first of all, … a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (1976a: 125); the notion that a commodity is an inherently useful thing, however, may itself be understood as a product of ideology. In the previous chapter, we discussed the ‘liberation’ of the individual: under the order of consumption, the ‘individual’ is ostensibly free to satisfy his or her needs. This, however, is merely a formal liberation of the individual; as we have seen, it is in fact the mobilisation of the subject as a productive force. As Baudrillard observes, ‘the individual’ is merely “an ideological structure, a historical form correlative with the commodity form (exchange value), and the object form (use value)” (1981: 133). Yet, further to this, and most significantly, although “[t]he postulate of a man endowed with needs and a natural inclination to satisfy them is never questioned” (Baudrillard 1981: 73), it may in fact be understood that the very concept of needs is itself an historical product of the ideology of capitalism. Of course, the concept of needs is central to the system of consumption, yet, because this postulate is never questioned (i.e., because it appears as natural, as universal), it constitutes the zenith of the reification of the logic of the commodity and the coup de grâce of the capitalist ideology.

I shall explain. Insofar as needs become manifest as the properly economic phenomenon of demand, they are a productive force. Needs are, however, in every way, a product of the social; they are “not only recuperated, but systematically induced and produced as productive forces” (Baudrillard 1981: 87). In the interests of according credit where it is due, it should be pointed out that Marx himself observed that “[p]roduction … produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object” (1976b: 21)—or, in other words, “[p]roduction not only provides the material for a need, but it also provides a need for the material” (Marx 1976b: 20). Marx, however, was apparently incapable of taking a necessary analytical step: it is not the case that the system alienates persons from their needs, or even that it creates artificial or secondary needs (such an analysis would perpetuate the quintessentially ideological postulate that holds needs as a natural, universal fact of human
subjectivity); rather, the very concept of needs is a product of the social, and specifically of the capitalist system, insofar as needs are to desire what abstract labour is to the essential human capacity to work:

> just as concrete work is abstracted, little by little, into labor power in order to make it homogenous with the means of production (machines, energy, etc.) … so desire is abstracted and atomized into needs, in order to make it homogenous with the means of satisfaction (products, images, sign-objects, etc.) … Needs and labor are therefore two modalities of the same exploitation of productive forces. (Baudrillard 1981: 83)

Thus, not only is labour reified as something that may be bought and sold, but so too needs are reified as things that must be met or fulfilled. Consequently, as we may distinguish between labour and needs, so may we distinguish between production as a productive force and consumption as a productive force. Specifically, as a theoretical complement to productivity, which namely describes that productive force which is extracted through the transformation (abstraction and atomisation) of work into labour, Baudrillard posits the notion of ‘consummativity’, which namely describes consumption understood as a productive force, i.e., that productive force which is extracted through the abstraction of desire and its atomisation into needs. “Thus”, states Baudrillard, “it should not be said that ‘consumption is entirely a function of production’: rather, *it is consummativity that is a structural mode of productivity*” (1981: 84).

Yet, not merely are needs and labour functionally homologous, but so too an identical pretext of ‘liberation’ underlies both:

> [The concept of needs is] the ultimate realization of the private individual as a productive force. The system of needs must wring liberty and pleasure from him as so many functional elements of the reproduction of the system of production and the relations of power that sanction it. It gives rise to these private functions according to the same principle of abstraction and radical ‘alienation’ that was formerly (and still today) the case for his labor power. (Baudrillard 1981: 85)

However, whilst needs and labour thus understood are certainly comparable phenomena, Baudrillard contends that the former plays a more potent ideological role than does the latter. Specifically, he posits that “[t]he same process of rationalization holds [for both needs and labor] (atomization and unlimited abstraction), but the ideological role of the concept of need is expanded: with all its hedonist illusions, need-pleasure masks the objective reality of need-productive force” (Baudrillard 1981: 83). For this reason, he argues that “it is necessary to overcome the ideological understanding of consumption as a process of craving and pleasure, as an extended metaphor on the digestive functions” (Baudrillard 1981: 85).

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1 Regarding this matter, Debord posits that “[i]t is doubtless impossible to contrast the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumerism with any authentic need or desire that is not itself equally determined by society and its history” (1994: 44).

2 This analysis corroborates Marx’s observation that a politics of production underlies the order of consumption, i.e., that consumption “appears as a moment of production” (1976b: 23).
The Front Line is Everywhere: For a Critique of Radical Commodities

The notion that needs, in their entirety, are a political and historical construct is a considerably radical proposition—this hypothesis shatters the foundations of much critical social analysis, particularly that which follows the Marxian tradition, and so it is certainly deserving of closer examination. Baudrillard observes that “[t]he legitimacy of the concept [of need] is rooted in the alleged existence of a vital anthropological minimum that would be the dimension of ‘primary needs’—an irreducible zone where the individual chooses himself, since he knows what he wants: to eat, to drink, to sleep, to make love, to find shelter, etc.” (1981: 80). He posits, however, that

the ‘vital anthropological minimum’ doesn’t exist: in all societies, it is determined residually by the fundamental urgency of an excess: the divine or sacrificial share, sumptuous discharge, economic profit. It is this pre-dedication of luxury that negatively determines the level of survival, and not the reverse (which is an idealist fiction).

Advantages, profits, sacrifice (in the sense of social wealth) and ‘useless’ expenditures are all deducted in advance. (Baudrillard 1981: 80)

In other words, “[t]he survival threshold is never determined from below, but from above” (Baudrillard 1981: 81). With regard to this matter, let us review a passage, of some length, from Frederick Engels’s ‘Principles of Communism’ (which appears as an appendix to Marx and Engels’s Manifesto of the Communist Party):

Labour is a commodity like any other and its price is determined by the same laws as that of any other commodity. The price of a commodity ... is on the average always equal to the cost of production of that commodity. The price of labour is, therefore, likewise equal to the cost of the production of labour. The latter cost consists precisely of that sum of the means of subsistence which is needed to make the worker fit to perform the labour and to prevent the working class from dying out. Thus, the worker will not receive more for his labour than is necessary for that purpose; the price of labour, or wages, will be the lowest, the minimum required to maintain a livelihood. Since business is now worse, now better, the worker receives now more, now less, just as the factory owner receives now more, now less, for his commodity. But just as the factory owner receives on the average, be the times good or be they bad, neither more nor less for his commodity than the cost of its production, so will the worker, on the average, receive neither more nor less than that minimum. (Engels, in Marx and Engels 1952: 73)

Engels’s analysis drifts into the territory of that which Baudrillard would call an ‘idealist fiction’. If wages fluctuate according to the undulations of the market, as Engels admits, only by way of an idealistic contortion of logic could one conclude that some requisite minimum determines the average of these fluctuations, and not vice versa. Thus, the average wage of the worker clearly dictates the survival minimum, the amount on which he or she must survive; the average does not magically coincide with some supernally predetermined minimum.

It may therefore be understood that the postulate of an anthropological minimum is itself perfectly ideological: it lends the appearance of legitimacy, of
naturalness, to the concept of needs. And needs, once established as elemental, are thoroughly subject to social determination. In other words, “just as survival can fall well below the vital minimum if the production of surplus value requires it, the threshold of obligatory consumption can be set well above the strictly necessary—always as a function of the production of surplus value: this is the case in our societies, where no one is free to live on raw roots and fresh water” (Baudrillard 1981: 81). Baudrillard’s analysis here is of course a reiteration of Veblen’s observation that ‘an element of the standard of living which set out with being primarily wasteful (ostentatious), ends with becoming, in the apprehension of the consumer, a necessary of life’. Consider, for example, television sets, automobiles, refrigerators, etc.—upon their introduction to the market, all were exotic, luxurious. Today, however, in all ‘advanced’ societies, a household that lacks any of the above is deemed either impoverished or nonconformist.

Yet, not merely does the capitalist system produce the entire concept of needs and determine the ‘threshold of obligatory consumption’; so too is each individual need a product of the system. As we have seen, it is not the case that needs inhere in the subject; rather, as Baudrillard posits, “needs, far from being articulated around the desire or the demand of the subject, find their coherence elsewhere: in a generalized system that is to desire what the system of exchange value is to concrete labor” (1981: 135)—this generalized system is namely that of use-value. That is to say, we have seen that needs are to desire what abstract human labour is to the concrete human capacity to create things. But, by extrapolating this first observation, we may conclude the following: as abstract human labour is correlative with the exchange-value of objects, so needs correlate to the use-value of objects:

Indeed, just as exchange value is not a substantial aspect of the product, but a form that expresses a social relation, so use value can no longer be viewed as an innate function of the object, but as a social determination (at once of the object, the subject, and their relation). (Baudrillard 1981: 135-136)

That is to say, in the same way that “no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond” (Marx 1976a: 177), the utility of an object does not inhere in it; consider the example of plants or animals that are used as food by one culture but which are sacralised or disregarded by another, such the escargot of the French, or cows in the view of Hinduism. Thus, not merely is exchange-value socially, culturally and historically contingent, but so too is use-value. Marx observed that ‘the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language’; we might now observe that the characteristic which objects have of being of utility is itself as much men’s social product as is their language. In short, there can be no mistaking the fact that an identical logic is at work in both use-value and exchange-value. Accordingly, Baudrillard hypothesises that needs (i.e. the system of needs) are the equivalent of abstract social labour: on them is erected the system of use value, just as abstract social labour is the basis for the system
of exchange value. This hypothesis also implies that, for there to be a system at all, use value and exchange value must be regulated by an identical abstract logic of equivalence, an identical code. (Baudrillard 1981: 131)

Or, in other words, “the functionality of objects, their moral code of utility, is as entirely governed by the logic of equivalence as is their exchange value status” (Baudrillard 1981: 134). Where the system of exchange-value establishes a structure of equivalence and thus correspondence between different objects, the general system of use-value establishes a direct equivalence between the function of an object—i.e., between an object as a use-value in the particular—and a commensurate need. Yet, “it is still the principle of equivalence that functions here as the reducer of symbolic ambivalence” (Baudrillard 1981: 134). For every need there is a corresponding object, for every object a corresponding need, and because this is a perfect, closed system, because there is a perfect equivalence between use-values and needs, desire—the symbolic—is foreclosed. And it is precisely for this reason, namely because needs and use-value conform to a logic of equivalence, that we may understand that each individual need is the product of the system; specifically, by virtue of the equivalence between needs and the use-values of objects, needs are “more or less specified in advance by objects” (Baudrillard 1981: 135). (Curiously enough, aspects of Marx’s own work anticipate such an analysis—recall his observation that ‘production not only provides the material for a need, but it also provides a need for the material’. But he has also suggested that “an objet d’art creates a public with artistic taste” (Marx 1976b: 20-21) and, more pertinently, that “production produces consumption … by creating as a want in the consumer products which it initially posits as an object” (1976b: 21).) In short, it might be understood that the systems of needs and of use-value are practically indistinguishable, and that both are products of the capitalist system of production.

Further, insofar as both needs and exchange-value are socially determined, abstract, systematised and reified—i.e., because “abstraction, reduction, rationalization and systematisation are as profound and as generalized at the level of ‘needs’ as at the level of commodities” (Baudrillard 1981: 135)—we may speak not merely of a fetishism of exchange-value, but also of a fetishism of use-value. Specifically, we may understand, after Baudrillard, that fetishism in fact issues from the apparent perfection attained by the logic of equivalence. “It is the abstract coherence, suturing all contradictions and divisions, that gives ideology its power of fascination (fetishism)” (Baudrillard 1981: 101). Thus, since we have seen that the abstract logic of equivalence is as fundamental to the system of use-value as it is to that of exchange-value (although it is better concealed in the former), we may understand that

use value—indeed, utility itself—is a fetishised social relation, just like the abstract equivalence of commodities. Use value is an abstraction. It is an abstraction of the
system of needs cloaked in the false evidence of a concrete destination and purpose, an intrinsic finality of goods and products. (Baudrillard 1981: 131)

In this way, Baudrillard turns Marxist analysis on its head. Insofar as it takes the utility of objects and a subject naturally endowed with needs as the bases of its critique, Marxist analysis does not unmask but in fact perpetuates the ideology of capital:

by maintaining use value as the category of ‘incomparability,’ Marxist analysis has contributed to the mythology (a veritable rationalist mystique) that allows the relation of the individual to objects conceived as use values to pass for a concrete and objective—in sum, ‘natural’—relation between man’s needs and the function proper to the object. This is all seen as the opposite of the abstract, reified ‘alienated’ relation the subject would have toward products as exchange values. (Baudrillard 1981: 134)

Paradoxically, as regards his uncompromising critique of Marxist analysis, it might be understood that whilst Baudrillard obviously does not preserve the word of Marx (as would a more orthodox Marxism), he nevertheless perpetuates the critical spirit of Marx. Louis Althusser (1976: 151) has stated that “[i]f I were asked to sum up in a few words the essential Thesis which I wanted to defend in my philosophical essays, I would say: Marx founded a new science, the science of History”. It is precisely this, Marx’s most elementary project, namely the critique of History, which Baudrillard here advances.

The essence of ideology
We have reviewed Barthes’s analysis of myth, his ‘ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass-culture’; he concluded that ideology acted in myth by way of a manipulation of the structure of equivalence, i.e., of the sign. Yet, it might be understood that Barthes’s critique of ideology fell somewhat short of the mark, insofar as it was principally directed only at the expressions of ‘mass-culture’, rather than at the mechanics thereof. In contrast to Barthes’s perspective, we will see that, according to Baudrillard’s analysis, it is not the case that ideology acts by way of a manipulation of the structure of equivalence, but rather that this structure of equivalence is itself quintessentially ideological. Before proceeding on this path of inquiry, however, I shall recapitulate what has been hitherto said with regard to the question of ideology.

We observed, in Chapter One, the means by which the commodity-form encroaches upon the subject, namely by way of the reification of its abstract logic. We additionally saw, in Chapter Three, that the ostensible liberation of the individual is merely the abstraction and mobilisation of the subject as a productive force, i.e., that “[t]he individual is nothing but the subject thought in economic terms, rethought, simplified, and abstracted by the economy” (Baudrillard 1981: 133). It is only now, however, that we may appreciate the true consequence of these observations: not merely is exchange-value an abstract logic which is reified and internalised, but so too
is use-value—indeed, the latter, although it appears as natural, is in fact no less abstract, as we have seen. To reiterate:

Just as, in terms of exchange value, the producer does not appear as a creator, but as abstract social labor power, so in the system of use value, the consumer never appears as desire and enjoyment, but as abstract social need power…. The abstract social producer is man conceived in terms of exchange value. The abstract social individual (the person with ‘needs’) is man thought of in terms of use value. (Baudrillard 1981: 132)

However, whilst both may function according to the same logic of equivalence, they are worlds apart in terms of their ideological significance:

it is necessary to see that the system of use value is not only the double, transposition or extension of that of exchange value. It functions simultaneously as the latter’s ideological guarantee…. It is understood, of course, that it is a naturalizing ideology we are concerned with here. (Baudrillard 1981: 138)

We have seen this naturalising ideology at work before. It of course underlies the reification of exchange-value, that is, the internalisation of the logic of exchange-value such that it becomes a ‘second nature’. Marxian analysis, however, pierces the façade that is exchange-value. Yet, the same naturalising ideology also connives to establish mythical connotations in culture as ahistorical signifieds, as incontestable knowledge, as facts. But, once more, we are equipped with the necessary analytic apparatus, specifically Barthes’s mythology, that critical application of semiology which penetrates the illusion of myth. It might be understood, however, that the analyses of both Marx and Barthes, in spite of the definite importance of their contributions to critical inquiry, simultaneously serve to bolster the ideological mechanisms of capitalism, inasmuch as they take use-value and denotation (respectively) as their points of reference, as their reality. That is to say, Marx takes use-value as the irreducible point from which his analysis issues, whilst Barthes takes denotation as his, yet use-value and denotation are no less unreal and no less ideological than are exchange-value and connotation. In fact, as we have seen, the ideological apparatus that is the system of use-value is all the more sinister (and all the more effective, in ideological terms) than that of exchange-value precisely because it appears as natural. Of course, the same could be said of denotation. Accordingly, Baudrillard posits that

use value fetishism is indeed more profound, more ‘mysterious’ than the fetishism of exchange value. The mystery of exchange value and the commodity can be unmasked, relatively—it has been since Marx—and raised to consciousness as a social relation. But value in the case of use value is enveloped in total mystery, for it is grounded anthropologically in the (self-) ‘evidence’ of a naturalness, in an unsurpassable original reference. … Here the mystery and cunning (of history and of reason) are at their most profound and tenacious. (1981: 139)

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3 This is precisely the Baudrillardian critique of Marx, which we saw in the final paragraph of the previous section.
In other words, “ideologically, [use value] seals off the system of production and exchange, thanks to the institution of an idealist anthropology that screens use value and needs from their historical logic in order to inscribe them in a formal eternity: that of utility for objects, that of the useful appropriation of objects by man in need” (Baudrillard 1981: 139). And thus “[t]he fetishism of use value redoubles and deepens the fetishism of exchange value” (Baudrillard 1981: 138).

We observed, in the previous chapter, that use-value serves, in Baudrillard’s view, as an *alibi* for the system of sign-value.\(^4\) We now see, however, that, before it serves as the alibi of sign-value, use-value in fact serves as the alibi of *exchange-value*—and so the implications of Baudrillard’s observation become clear. Because use-value appears as the (natural) reality which exchange-value despoils, it serves as the *alibi*, the *ideological guarantee* of the latter. Yet, we have seen that use-value is in fact no less abstract, no less systematised and no less a product of history than is exchange-value. We have seen, in other words, that “needs (UV system) do not constitute a qualitative, incommensurable concrete reality exterior to political economy, but rather a system that is itself induced by the EV system and which functions according to the same logic” (Baudrillard 1981: 154). Therefore, because use-value is not a reality that is outside of or beyond political economy, because it is a *simulated* reality which is in fact internal to that system, we may legitimately speak of a *reification of use-value*. This *illusion* of use-value is the real apotheosis of the capitalist ideology. It is certainly true that the mystery and cunning of history and of reason are here at their most profound and tenacious. In sum, it may be understood that the institution of use-value/needs is a false reality. As Baudrillard puts it, “there are only needs because the system needs them” (1981: 82). And so, consequently, there can be no mistaking the fact that “*the system of needs is the product of the system of production*” (Baudrillard 1998: 74).

Let us now return to the question of the ideological function of structures of equivalence. The observation that the concept of use-value is no less artificial than that of exchange-value is consistent with and indeed elucidates Baudrillard’s assertion that *all* systems and values lie in radical opposition to symbolic exchange. Not only have we seen that the ideological consequence of use-value is no less than that of exchange-value, we have seen that it is in fact *greater*, insofar as use-value appears to be natural. Baudrillard describes this as “the strategic logic of the commodity; its second term acts as the satellite and alibi for the first” (1981: 148). Such a strategic logic, however, is not characteristic of the commodity alone; we might understand that it is in fact typical of a ‘naturalising ideology’ in all its aspects. Specifically, it might be understood that the capitalist ideology is characterised not firstly by a process of ‘alienation’, but rather by a process of strategic *bifurcation*.

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\(^4\) Specifically, see the section ‘Objects as social discriminants: the sign-object, or the sign-value of the commodity’, in the previous chapter.
We are now approaching a full view of the Baudrillardian conception of ideology, which, in essence, describes a perfectly coherent but entirely imposed duality. Moreover, it is the perfect equivalence realised in the two moieties of the system which, in Baudrillard’s view, abolishes the ambivalence of symbolic exchange—for every need, an object; for every object, a need. We have latterly focussed upon the ideological role of use-value in relation to exchange-value, however it must not be forgotten that, as was discussed in the previous chapter, the structure of signification—of sign-value, of the signifier and the signified—is also wholly implicated in this chicanery. Indeed, we saw that the structures of economy and of signification are identical, i.e., that “exchange value is to the signifier what use value is to the signified” (Baudrillard 1981: 127). Yet, it is not merely the case that signification is implicated in the problem of ideology; rather, according to Baudrillard’s analysis, it is in fact the structure of the sign which serves as model for the ideological process in its entirety:

In fact, it is the semiological organization itself, the entrenchment in a system of signs, that has the goal of reducing the symbolic function. This semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological process. (Baudrillard 1981: 98)

The duality instituted by ideology is, like the structure of the sign, perfectly coherent, yet it is by no means neutral. Baudrillard describes the ideological process thus:

This process is always a process of abstraction by signs, of substituting a system of distinctive oppositions for the process of real labor (the first moment: process of signification). But these oppositions are not neutral; they rank themselves hierarchically, privileging one of the terms (second moment: process of discrimination). Signification does not always carry discrimination with it (phonemic differences at the level of language), but discrimination always presupposes signification—the sign-function that reduces ambivalence and the symbolic. (1981: 100-101)

The process just described is precisely one of bifurcation—yet, as indicated above, this is a bifurcation which is anything but even-handed. Rather, this process of bifurcation is entirely strategic, it is the quintessential manoeuvre of ideology. The apparent impartiality of the structure of signification is here exploited: a second process (discrimination) is smuggled in under the cover of the first (signification). (This, of course, is the process which Barthes observed in the structure of myth—see ‘The object of ideology’, above.) In other words, “[b]ifurcation, or marking by signs, is always accompanied by a totalization via signs and a formal autonomy of sign systems” (Baudrillard 1981: 101), yet, because this bifurcation is not neutral, because this imposition of the logic of the sign is at once also slyly discriminatory, “[t]his abstract totalization permits signs to function ideologically, that is, to establish and perpetuate real discriminations and the order of power” (Baudrillard 1981: 101).

Thus, a structural logic erects in the place of symbolic exchange, which is complex, unordered and unpredictable, a totality of perfectly coherent oppositions, of
calculated differences and equivalences, wherein are concealed the mechanisms and machinations of power. In his discussion of myth, Barthes elegantly evokes this, the system’s perfect coherence, its seamlessness:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity…. (Barthes 1973: 143)

The machinations of the capitalist order, therefore, are hidden in plain sight. The sinister perfection of the system truly lies not in its perfect balance, but rather in its strategic imbalance-disguised-as-balance: within the oppositions instituted, one term adopts the guise of nature, of reality, against which is contrasted an ‘alienating’ term, for which the first in turn functions as alibi, but it is only together that these opposing terms disguise the fundamental contingency of the system as a whole. That is to say, it is not one or the other but the two terms in unison which perpetrate this structural ‘ruse’. In Baudrillard’s own words,

it is not merely such and such a value that reduces symbolic exchange, or emerges from its rupture; it is first the structural opposition of two values: exchange value and use value, whose logical form is the same, and whose dual organization punctuates the economic. (1981: 136)

Therefore, the terms ‘structural’ and ‘strategic’ are, in this sense, all-but-synonymous. And so it may be understood that “ideology lies already whole in the relation of EV to UV, that is, in the logic of the commodity, as is so in the relation of Sr to Sd, i.e., in the internal logic of the sign” (Baudrillard 1981: 144). Accordingly, it is clear that there is no conflict, or any hierarchical or causal relationship, between the commodity and the sign. Both commodity and sign are equally complicit in the capitalist system; its ideology lies already whole in the structure of both. Thus, to reiterate:

At bottom, [use value and the signified] are only simulation models, produced by the play of exchange value and of signifiers. They provide the latter with the guarantee of the real, the lived, the concrete; they are the guarantee of an objective reality for which, however, in the same moment, these systems qua systems substitute their own total logic. … Use value and the signified do not constitute an elsewhere with respect to the systems of the other two; they are only their alibis. (Baudrillard 1981: 137)

The dissolution of reality
The crux of Baudrillard’s censure of Marx’s analysis is now fully apparent. It is not the case, according to Baudrillard, that a new system of value (exchange-value) emerged, so defiling the old (use-value). Rather, the two emerge precisely in unison; they are interrelated components of the same strategic/structural development. Of

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course, consequently, one cannot be properly understood by way of an analysis which takes the other as its point of reference (this was Marx’s mistake); the two—specifically in their interrelationship—must be analysed as a whole. The consequence of this theoretical development is a thoroughgoing destabilisation of the notion of reality itself. Allow me to explain.

The strategic manoeuvre embedded in the structure of the commodity is, as we know, not confined to the economic, for the structure of the commodity-form in fact mirrors that of the sign:

Since the commodity comprises simultaneously exchange value and use value, its total analysis must encompass the two sides of the system. Similarly, the sign is at once signifier and signified; and so the analysis of the sign form must be established on two levels. … In both cases, this (internal) relation is established as a hierarchical function between a dominant form and an alibi (or satellite) form, which is the logical crowning and ideological completion of the first. (Baudrillard 1981: 143)

Thus, the same manoeuvre which has been observed in the structure of the commodity is found also in the structure of the sign. Yet, the commodity-structure, as we have seen, properly consists not merely of two terms (exchange-value and use-value), but of three: exchange-value, use-value and needs. We may locate the theoretical points at which these respectively reside: in the object; in the relation between object and subject; and in the (ostensibly irreducible) subject. Correspondingly, the sign-structure also consists of three parts: signifier, signified and referent. Once more, we may determine the theoretical locations of these, respectively: in the language of a community; in the relation between the linguistic community and the so-called real world; and in (an ostensibly irreducible) reality. Yet, in the same way that needs are nothing more than the internalised equivalent of use-value—i.e., the manifestation of the reification of use-value, thus the ultimate alibi of exchange-value and the quintessentially ideological term that completes political economy—so the referent may be understood as nothing other than the ultimate accomplishment of the structure of the sign. In other words, just as use-values and needs are ultimately indistinguishable, as we have observed, so may we conclude, as does Baudrillard (1981: 155), that “there is no fundamental difference between the referent and the signified”, thus that “the spontaneous confusion which so often arises here can only be symptomatic: the referent has no other value than that of the signified”. Of course, consequently, the notion of an objective reality that would serve as the reference of language is irreversibly dissolved:

The crucial thing is to see that the separation of the sign and the world is a fiction.… The logic of equivalence, abstraction, discreteness and projection of the sign engulfs the Rft as surely as it does the Sd. The ‘world’ that the sign ‘evokes’ (the better to distance itself from it) is nothing but the effect of the sign, the shadow that it carries about, its ‘pantographic’ extension. Even better: this world is quite simply the Sd-Rft. … [T]he Sd-Rft is a single and compact thing, an identity of content that acts as the
moving shadow of the Sr. It is the reality effect in which the play of signifiers comes to fruition and deludes the world. (Baudrillard 1981: 152)

If there is in fact no world outside of language to which the sign may refer, as Baudrillard argues, it also becomes apparent that the Barthesian distinction between denotation and connotation is rather misleading. The referent of a sign at the level of connotation is, in Barthes’s view, an ideological illusion, to which is opposed the referent of a sign at the level of denotation, which is namely reality. Yet, if we understand that there can be no objective reality, it becomes clear that “denotation is never really anything more than the most attractive and subtle of connotations” (Baudrillard 1981: 158). Thus, there is, in Barthes’s analyses in Mythologies, a fundamental flaw, akin to that which has been observed in Marx: Barthes, like Marx, takes as his point of reference a term which is not external to the object of his study but which is in fact wholly intrinsic to the system under examination. The object of denotation is only an illusion of an external reality. Thus, it is once more in a semblance of reality, of nature, that we find the quintessence of the ideological operation:

[T]he denotation-connotation distinction appears unreal and itself ideological. … Far from being the objective term to which connotation is opposed as an ideological term, denotation is thus (since it naturalizes the very process of ideology) the most ideological term—ideological to the second degree. … This is exactly the same ideological function we have discerned of use value in its relation to exchange value. (Baudrillard 1981: 158-159)

The dawn of the era of simulation
Baudrillard observes that “the false is born along with the natural” (1983: 87)—in light of our recent discussion, however, it might be more useful to state that the natural is born along with the false. Yet, in a sense, this comparison is ultimately misleading in either orientation. Specifically, there can be no false, since there can be no real in relation to which the former might be negatively defined. The following passage was quoted above, however the parenthesis, which is presently of great significance, was previously excluded; thus, let us now consider the passage in its entirety:

[Use value and the signified] provide [exchange value and the signifier] with the guarantee of the real, the lived, the concrete; they are the guarantee of an objective reality for which, however, in the same moment, these systems qua systems substitute their own total logic. (Even the term ‘substitute’ is misleading, in this context. It implies the existence somewhere of a fundamental reality that the system appropriates or distorts. In fact, there is no reality or principle of reality other than that directly produced by the system as its ideal reference.) (Baudrillard 1981: 137, my emphasis)

It might therefore be understood that the distinction between truth and falsity, at least in this sense, is void. Neither the system of signs nor that of the economy constitutes a falsehood behind which is obscured a fundamental or irreducible reality. In other
words, neither the sign nor the commodity represents a subversion of some more authentic social truth. Rather, these systems represent a new structuration of the social, a supersession of earlier modes of social organisation. (Or, more accurately, what is described here is a new theory of the structuration of the social, a new ontological framework, which is more abstract than those which preceded it.) This thoroughgoing denial of the real institutes, in Baudrillard’s analysis, the era of simulation.

The era of simulation, for Baudrillard, is radically opposed to that of representation (or misrepresentation) because representation implies the existence of a reference, a reality. A simulacrum, on the other hand, is a ‘copy without an original’.6

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs…. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double…. (Baudrillard 1994: 2)

Yet, we must be careful here, for simulation should not be ascribed a status of unreality, or of being less than real. That is to say, simulation must be distinguished, according to Baudrillard’s definition, from dissimulation, for the latter belongs to the order of representation:

“Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms” (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’

(Baudrillard 1994: 3)

Simulation is therefore characterised by the dissolution of the division between sign and referent—signs themselves become their own referents. In other words, the rise of simulation marks not an anarchy of unreality, for unreality implies a positive reality in relation to which it is negatively defined. In contrast, simulation supersedes the real—the notion of simulation describes the death of the real at the hands of the hyperreal:

[The real] no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Baudrillard 1994: 2)

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6 The description of the simulacrum as a ‘copy without an original’ can be found on the back cover of Baudrillard’s Simulacra and Simulation (Baudrillard 1994).
Simulation is thus fundamentally paradoxical: it is reality after reality. For all of Baudrillard’s explanations, the following short passage from Ecclesiastes (cited in Baudrillard 1994: 1) perhaps best captures the essence of this paradox:

The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact that there is none.

The simulacrum is true.

As a means of charting the shift from the real to the hyperreal, from representation to simulation, Baudrillard describes the evolution of the image (or, rather, the evolution of our understanding of the logic of the image). These, he posits, are “the four successive phases of the image”:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the absence of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (1994: 6)

Baudrillard may be speaking here of the image, but the true object of his analysis is in fact much more momentous. This formulation describes not a revolution in modes of representation, but rather the utter demise of representation as a separate realm, and the convergence of signs and reality. Of course, this sequence suggests not a successive deterioration of the external world per se—Baudrillard’s concept of simulation does not crumble mountains—but rather a transformation of ontological frameworks, a heightened reflexivity as regards our understanding of what constitutes our reality. It might be understood that Baudrillard’s concept of simulation issues from an ontological extremism, from an ontological critique which takes no prisoners, which abolishes itself in its own course—in the era of the hyperreal, he argues, “[i]t is all of metaphysics that is lost” (Baudrillard 1994: 2). We saw above that the structure of the commodity mirrors that of the sign; now, however, we see that all of reality as we know it may in fact be understood as the product of the sign—or, rather, as the product of the signifier, since, as has been discussed, the signified and the referent are merely the effects, the alibis, of the former. In the final analysis, it might be understood, in agreement with Jacques Lacan, and thus in anticipation of the coming chapter, that “[e]verything emerges from the structure of the signifier” (Lacan 1994: 206).

Conclusion

We have gleaned from the work of Barthes and Baudrillard an understanding of the ideological processes whereby historically contingent institutions and ideas come to appear as ahistorical, as natural—in short, as reality. As Zizek has observed, “[a]n ideology is really ‘holding us’ only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality—that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself” (1989: 49). Taken to its apparent extreme, however, specifically in the work of Baudrillard, the critique of ideology serves to destabilise all notions of reality and likewise all foundations from which a radical
politics, or indeed any critical endeavour, might proceed. Accordingly, with regard to the question of radical commodities, Baudrillard’s analysis is, needless to say, most troublesome. To be precise, his line of inquiry apparently leads us into a position of irredeemable fatalism; it would seem to spell the end of politics, and represent an impasse for critical theory. As Chris Rojek has observed, “[Baudrillard’s] sociology describes a pathological society in which there is no possibility of restitution or advance” (1993: 109). Yet, we are not without recourse here. In fact, quite the reverse is true. Baudrillard’s concept of simulation represents a theoretical development of great significance; the problem with his critique of ideology is not that it goes too far, but rather that it does not go far enough. We know that Baudrillard’s conception of ideology represents a radical departure from the Marxist tradition, but his severance therefrom is dangerously incomplete. Allow me to explain further.

We have seen that the Marxian analysis of the commodity-form is, per se, unsound. Specifically, Baudrillard has shown that needs, which function as the truth from which Marx’s critique proceeds, are no less historically contingent, no less artificial, than the commodity-form itself. Indeed, it may be understood that needs are a product of the commodity-form — recall Baudrillard’s observation that ‘the system of needs is the product of the system of production’. Zizek, well aware of the problematic of the Marxian analysis of the commodity, has argued that “the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the ‘content’ supposedly hidden behind the form: the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form … but, on the contrary, the ‘secret’ of this form itself” (1989: 11). Of course, Baudrillard’s analysis of the structure of the commodity-form, and indeed of the sign-form also, is most acute. Since it reveals that needs and the referent are the objects of a most heightened fetishism, it might be understood that Baudrillard’s analysis unveils that ‘secret’, of which Zizek speaks, of the forms themselves of the commodity and the sign. Yet, a fundamental shortcoming is discernable in Baudrillard’s analysis: in spite of his departure, in so many regards, from the Marxian position, Baudrillard would appear to attribute to ideology a certain universality, in a manner that is entirely reminiscent of Marx. The consequences of such an attribution, however, are far more unsettling in Baudrillard’s case than in that of Marx, for Marx, as we know, presumes a truth in relation to which ideology may be revealed as such, whereas no comparable truth is possible in the Baudrillardian view. To be precise, in identifying the process of bifurcation as ideological, Baudrillard radically expands the scope of ideology, such that it encompasses all that was once understood as reality, and yet, in the same moment, he surreptitiously locates this process ‘beyond the scope of human intervention’. According to Gerry Gill, Baudrillard’s conception of the social describes “a great spectacle of signs obeying logics and forces beyond the scope of human intervention” (1984: 83). Thus, for all the apparent historical

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7 Naturally, the Marxian critique of political economy is torn from its roots by these analytic developments, as we have seen.

8 Zizek’s comment here refers not only to the Marxian analysis of the commodity, but also to the Freudian analysis of dreams; the latter, however, is of course not a matter with which we are concerned.
specificity of his analysis, Baudrillard accords to ‘the system’ an ahistorical agency. In this way, the Baudrillardian conception of ideology *short-circuits analysis*, particularly political analysis. This assumption of an agency of ‘the system’, however, is tenuous indeed, and so Baudrillard’s analysis of ideology is itself deserving of critique. Accordingly, in an endeavour to reinvigorate the very possibility of politics in the era of simulation, it is the continued critique of the notion of ideology with which we will be concerned in the coming chapter.

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9 Recall that Baudrillard takes issue with Marx’s use of the word ‘fetishism’, on the grounds that the term is ‘dangerous not only because it short-circuits analysis, but because since the 18th century it has conducted the whole repertoire of occidental Christian and humanist ideology’. In a similar vein, it might now be understood that Baudrillard’s use of the term ‘ideology’ itself short-circuits analysis, precisely because it combines the whole repertoire of Marxist determinism with an apolitical fatalism.
5. The Question of the Political

If we are to determine the possibility of a radical politics in the era of simulation, and so be able to assess the political significance of radical commodities, we must firstly appreciate the structure of the political in this historical context, that is, in this age which is characterised by the contingency of truth. On this point, however, a most significant complication faces us, namely that politics in its entirety is apparently negated by Baudrillard’s concept of simulation. This apparent negation of politics issues from the fact that, in an unspoken analytic move, Baudrillard places the ideological process outside of the scope of human social subjectivity. As has been mentioned, in failing to identify this as an operation attributable to persons or collectivities (whether individuals, corporations, the state, etc.), Baudrillard effectively accords agency to the structure of the social itself, and thereby emasculates politics in toto. Certain key aspects of Baudrillard’s analysis, however, are problematic. For this reason, in theoretical pursuit of the possibility of politics itself, we shall proceed by way of a more discriminating critique of the idea of ideology—specifically, by way of a critique of the critique of ideology. Two matters are paramount here: (1) the relationship between ideology and the idea of truth, and (2) the question of political agency in the era of simulation.

Against the critique of Ideology

I will begin here with a summary of the problem of ideology as it presently faces us. As we saw in the previous chapter, Marx’s critique of political economy is sullied by his belief in the irreducibility of use-value. Unsurprisingly, similarly erroneous reasoning is discernable in the Marxian conception of ideology also, that is, in Marx’s conviction that the unjust reality of material production under capitalism is veiled by “legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic, in short, ideological, forms” (Marx 1976b: 4, my emphasis). To be precise, on account of the equally ideological structure of both the commodity and the sign, we should, according to Baudrillard’s analysis, repudiate Marx’s base/superstructure thesis in its entirety:

The effect of [the] homological structuration of values in what can conveniently be called the fields of economy and of signification is to displace the whole process of ideology and to theorize it in radically different terms. Ideology can no longer be understood as an infra-superstructural relation between a material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.), which expresses and masks the contradictions at the ‘base.’ (Baudrillard 1981: 143)

Of course, we have already reviewed Baudrillard’s ‘radically different’ theorisation of ideology, namely his notion that “ideology is the process of reducing and abstracting symbolic material into a form” (Baudrillard 1981: 143), i.e., the process through which the symbolic is abstracted into systems of value. I should emphasise, however, that Baudrillard’s radical reappraisal of the problem of ideology is necessitated by an
analytic move which does not merely shift the focus of ideological critique, but which in fact affects the very foundation of such analysis.

If the question of ideology might, for a moment, be allied with that of strategy, it will be seen that an interesting parallel emerges. Recall the following passage (which was previously cited in Chapter Two):

The system in which [consumers] move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere. Because of this, the ‘strategic’ model is also transformed, as if defeated by its own success: it was by definition based on the definition of a ‘proper’ distinct from everything else; but now that ‘proper’ has become the whole. (de Certeau 1984: 40, my emphasis)

Akin to de Certeau’s observations apropos strategy, what may be construed from Baudrillard’s critique of ideology is the conclusion that there is no longer an elsewhere which is opposed to or masked by ideology—there is only simulation—and it is precisely for this reason that the problem of ideology, like that of strategy, must be understood in radically different terms. The idea of a superstructure describes the suppression of some profound reality, yet Baudrillard’s analysis of the bifurcatory process of ideology has shown that any base to which such a superstructure would appear to be opposed is necessarily as ideological, as historically contingent, as the superstructure itself—indeed, more so. There can no longer be an ideological distortion of reality, since we can no longer isolate any objective reality which might be distorted. There is instead only simulation, which is all-encompassing, omnipresent. And, in the era of simulation, what has disappeared is not only that reality to which ideology would otherwise be opposed, but also (by way of a slight but important shift in our analytic perspective) that reality which would serve as the point of reference for a critique of any so-called ideology. Indeed, we have already discussed the effects of this: Marx’s critique of the commodity-structure was fundamentally contradictory because he retained use-value as his reality, as his point of reference; likewise Barthes’s critique of myth, because he mistook the denoted signified for an essential truth. In sum, that line of reasoning which reveals the ideological character of use-value (i.e., which denounces the presumed status of use-value as a truth that is distorted by exchange-value), and which finds an homology between the commodity-form and the sign-form, also, in so doing, irrevocably debases the project of ideological critique as it has been conventionally known.

Of course, these analytic developments also fundamentally complicate the notion of a radical commodity. More than this, the very possibility of a radical politics is thus thrown into doubt: since we have witnessed, in Baudrillard’s work, a critique which calls into question all notions of truth and reality, it might be assumed that any possibility of locating a foundation from which a politics of resistance could be articulated is accordingly abolished. And yet, this is not the end of the matter, for Baudrillard’s radical conception of ideology is not without problems of its own.
Michel Foucault has opined that “[t]he notion of ideology appears to me to be
difficult to make use of [because], like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition
to something else that is supposed to count as truth” (2002: 119). Indeed, whilst
ideology, as conceived by Baudrillard, might seem to be without exception, we find,
even in his more recent works (e.g., Baudrillard 2003), as a counterpoint to the
concept of an implicitly ideological hyperreality, the notion of the *symbolic*. As we
know, Baudrillard posits the symbolic as that which is excluded by the logics of the
sign and the economy; it is the symbolic that, in its resistant purity, always stands
opposed to these logics. Specifically, the Baudrillardian symbolic, it is suggested, is a
radical alternative, the ostensible *beyond* of the general system of political economy,
i.e., the fields of utility, economy and signification considered as a whole (recall
Baudrillard’s observation that the systems of use-value, exchange-value and sign-
value ‘are all joined in the single form of political economy which is opposed, as a
whole, to symbolic exchange’). In short, it is the symbolic which, for all intents and
purposes, counts as truth for Baudrillard. Thus, in spite of his apparently
thoroughgoing denunciation of any reality outside of signification, as seen in his
concepts of simulation and hyperreality—that is, in spite of his assertion that ‘there is
no reality or principle of reality other than that directly produced by the system as its
ideal reference’—we might conclude that the symbolic persists as Baudrillard’s real.

It is clear that the matter of ideology is invariably problematic. On the one hand,
it would seem that one cannot *neglect* the question of ideology, for one would thereby
effectively abet those undeniably political or strategic mechanisms which inhere in
the ostensible truths of the social. Indeed, a thoroughgoing disavowal of the question
of ideology stands to abolish the foundations of critical analysis, since one may
thereafter look upon the strategic undercurrents of social systems with a disinterested
eye at best; or, worse, such strategic undercurrents may become effectively
imperceptible, i.e., inadmissible as objects of study. On the other hand, however, if
one *preserves* a critique of ideology, it seems that one cannot evade the implication of
‘something else that is supposed to count as truth’. To reiterate what was said above,
this is precisely the function of the concept of the symbolic in Baudrillard’s work; its
status is that of a presumed truth. Yet, this apparent contradiction does not mean that
we ought to dismiss Baudrillard’s analyses *in toto*; rather, we should examine more
closely his notion of the symbolic. After all, it is with acts which institute or reinstate
the symbolic that Baudrillard ascribes the final—i.e., *only*—prospect of political
resistance in the era of simulation (Baudrillard 2001; 2003). (Accordingly, the matter
of the symbolic could be of marked importance as regards the question of radical
commodities.) As Gerry Gill observes, however, the symbolic “is a notoriously
unspecific concept in [Baudrillard’s] work” (1984: 74). With this in mind, in order to
better isolate its significance in relation to critical analysis, I shall approach the
question of the Baudrillardian symbolic by way of an appeal to the work of Slavoj
Zizek. Specifically, it is my contention that a correlation may be drawn between the
Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian Real—or, to be precise, between the
Baudrillardian symbolic and Zizek’s articulation of the Lacanian Real.\(^1\) In this way, we will also approach a perspective from which we might understand ideology, and even critique it, while avoiding the problem posed by Foucault.

In this analysis of the Baudrillardian symbolic, a principal distinction must be made, namely between (1) reality as we may know it, and (2) that which is described by the Lacanian notion of the Real. I am effectively drawing a bipartite correlation here, firstly between the Baudrillardian ‘code’ and the Lacanian ‘symbolic’, and secondly—and, of course, more importantly—between the Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian Real. Thus, it is my contention that the various logics of value—namely use-value, exchange-value and sign-value (i.e., the logics of utility, of the market and of status), each and all of which are, in Baudrillard’s articulation, radically opposed to symbolic exchange—might be associated with the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic order (which is, confusingly for us, the polar opposite of the Baudrillardian symbolic, the Baudrillardian symbolic being associable with the Lacanian Real)\(^2\). Otherwise known as the Other, or the ‘big’ (i.e., capitalised) Other, the Lacanian Symbolic comprises the differential system of language, and thus ‘reality’ as we know it. Establishing a correlation between the Baudrillardian code and the Lacanian Symbolic, however, is necessary merely in order to make the more important association here, namely between the Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian Real. This latter association, particularly if we take into account Zizek’s interpretation of the Real and his analysis of its consequence as regards ideology, stands to illuminate for us the significance of that which Baudrillard calls ‘the symbolic’.

It was stated in the previous chapter that simulation should be understood as nothing less than reality; Baudrillard has noted that, in the wake of the demise of representation (and thus also of misrepresentation), “[i]llusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (1994: 19). Incidentally, Baudrillard’s reference here to ‘the real’ is more or less compatible with the Lacanian notion of the Real: consider that, according to the Lacanian perspective, “the real is the impossible”

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\(^{1}\) I use capitalisation here in order to distinguish the Lacanian ‘Real’ from other usages of the word ‘real’—this is consistent with Zizek’s usage, for his references to the Lacanian Real are always capitalised in this manner.

\(^{2}\) Keeping Zizek’s precedent regarding the Real in mind, I shall also capitalise my references to the Lacanian symbolic (hence, the Symbolic). Without such a typographic distinction, references to either the Baudrillardian symbolic or the Lacanian Symbolic—and, in particular, comparative references—will certainly become unwieldy. It should be stated that whilst it may in one regard seem more appropriate to capitalise the Baudrillardian symbolic, since it is this which is associable with the Real, I would argue that it is in fact the Lacanian symbolic which is more befitting of capitalisation, not merely in the interests of maintaining consistency among the Lacanian terms/concepts, but also because the Lacanian use of the term (‘the symbolic order’) refers to the other (which faces the subject) in its organised entirety, that is, to the ‘big Other’, the (capitalised) Autre (or grand Autre). The Baudrillardian symbolic, in contrast, names that which can only be alluded to, hinted at, and which is thus associable with the Lacanian objet petit a (the small a which distinguishes the autre from the Autre; that discrete object which faces the subject as an embodiment of the fundamental lack of the Other, and which is thus radically opposed to the Other in its entirety). In sum, it must be understood that Baudrillard’s terminology is effectively antithetical in relation to that of Lacan, and vice versa. For example, Baudrillard states that “[b]y taking all the cards to itself, [the system] forces the Other to change the rules of the game” (2001)—Baudrillard’s use of ‘the Other’ here refers to terrorist minorities and the like, i.e., to those who are excluded from the system. According to Lacanian convention, in contrast, ‘the Other’ would name the ‘system’ itself, for it is the system which is the Other that faces the subject. This terminological reversal is evident also in the two theorists’ uses of the words ‘symbolic’ and ‘real’, as we are beginning to see.
Simulation is reality, from which the Real is always excluded, or in which the Real can never be expressed or seized—hence the correlation between simulation and the Lacanian Symbolic, to which is opposed the Baudrillardian symbolic/the Lacanian Real. Regarding the Lacanian concepts, Darian Leader has observed that “[t]he real, in one sense, is simply what is excluded from the symbolic, excluded from the network of signifiers which build up the reality of the world, and which is hence impossible to know” (Leader, in Bullock et al. 1999: 731). The concept of simulation is, at base, an ontological claim, a recognition of the entirely social character—the contingency—of what we know as reality. The notion of the Real, in contrast, describes that which can never be grasped. The idea of the exclusion of the Real, however, is a little misleading. The Real is not external to the Symbolic order; rather, the Real effectively names the limit of the Symbolic order. In the words of Leader, the Real is “a limit concept in relation to the symbolic” (Leader, in Bullock et al. 1999: 731). Zizek similarly posits that the Real is “a certain limit which is always missed—we always come too early or too late” (1989: 173). In sum, as Alain Sheridan observes, the “Lacanian concept of the ‘real’ is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable” (1977: 280).

I have suggested that there is a distinct proximity between the Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian Real; this is observable on a number of levels, not least of which is the particular representation of these concepts in the two authors’ writings. Recall Gill’s observation that the symbolic is a ‘notoriously unspecific concept’ in Baudrillard’s work; correspondingly, David Macey notes that “Lacan’s references to the real tend to be allusive” (2000: 324). Lacan’s references to the real, however, are also elusive; he states that it is the “real that eludes us” (Lacan 1994: 53), but so too do his references to it, albeit understandably, necessarily. Some measure of obscurity is symptomatic of what it is that these concepts are intended to describe. Baudrillard accordingly maintains that the symbolic can never be named, ‘except by allusion, by infraction’:

It is the symbolic that continues to haunt the sign, for in its total exclusion it never ceases to dismantle the formal correlation of Sr and Sd. But the symbolic, whose virtuality of meaning is so subversive of the sign, cannot, for this very reason, be named except by allusion, by infraction (Baudrillard 1981: 161)

It might therefore be understood that the Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian Real share a quality of positivity in their ostensibly pure form, and of radical negativity in their respective relationships with the order of signification and the Symbolic order. In Baudrillard’s view, symbolic exchange (of which the gift, as has been observed, is today our ‘most proximate example’) consists of relations that are perfect, they are pure and complete in their positivity because they are intrinsically organised, because they do not derive their significance from their differential relationship to other terms in a system—recall Baudrillard’s observation that ‘it matters little what object is involved’ in symbolic relations. So soon, however, as the
apparent purity, the autonomy of such relations is compromised, indeed displaced by
the onset of differential systems of value, so the symbolic endures not replete in its
positivity but instead as a virulent negativity, as a lack in the social, precisely because
it lingers as the spectre of its own absence. Recall Marx’s observation that the
exchange of commodities begins not within a primitive community but at its
periphery, where it trades with other communities, after which the logic of the
commodity ‘strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it’; in this
way, a structure of abstract equivalence abolishes positive relations between
producers, i.e., relations which would, in the Baudrillardian view, constitute symbolic
exchange in its positive fullness. The symbolic thereafter persists merely as a ghost of
its former self, as the mark of a fundamental lack, as a reminder of the loss of that
state of being to which the community can never properly return so long as the
commodity-structure prevails in the minds of its people. The resemblance, in this
regard, of the symbolic and the Real is most striking. Consider Zizek’s explication of
the Real:

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\text{The Real is the fullness of the inert presence, positivity; nothing is lacking in the}
\text{Real—that is, the lack is introduced only by the symbolization; it is a signifier which}
\text{introduces a void, an absence in the Real. But at the same time the Real is in itself a}
\text{hole, a gap, an opening in the middle of the symbolic order—it is the lack around}
\text{which the symbolic order is structured. The Real as a starting point, as a basis, is a}
\text{positive fullness without lack; as a product, a leftover of symbolization, it is, in}
\text{contrast, the void, the emptiness created, encircled by the symbolic structure. (Zizek}
\text{1989: 170)}
\]

Once more the parity of these two concepts is apparent: just as the Real is the lack
around which the Symbolic order is structured, according to Zizek, so the symbolic,
for Baudrillard, ‘continues to haunt the sign’.

I should presently point out, in the interests of averting confusion, and in the
interests of further delineating the notion of the symbolic, that, whilst I have spoken
of it uncritically, Baudrillard’s association of the gift with the symbolic is a
comparison of which we ought to be somewhat wary. I shall explain. Gill perceives in
Baudrillard an “essentializing urge” (1984: 70), from which emerges, in his view, a
number of problems. One such problem lies in Baudrillard’s “attempt to link the very
form of the sign (the relationship of equivalence between signifier and signified) to
the logic of commodity exchange. The elaboration of this argument at some points
threatens to extend itself into the absurd implication that language itself … is in
essential conflict with symbolic exchange” (Gill 1984: 70). Now, if we take ‘symbolic
exchange’ and ‘gift exchange’ as synonymous terms, Gill’s critique here proves
persuasive. He argues that “the sign form when applied to cultural meaning is a form

\[\text{3 That abstract equivalence which brings about the demise of the symbolic, however, need not be that of the commodity; as}
\text{Baudrillard has observed, and as was discussed in Chapter Three, it may also be the equivalence of the sign that dismantles}
\text{the symbolic. In fact, it might be understood the decisive moment of loss predates the onset of the commodity-form, and coincides}
\text{instead with the onset of the sign-form.}\]
of such generality that it must be seen as underpinning both gift and commodity exchange” (Gill 1984: 70); he argues, in other words, that it is unreasonable to assume that the logics of the gift and the sign are mutually exclusive. Of course, so long as a synonymy remains between ‘symbolic exchange’ and ‘gift exchange’, this point is difficult to contest; consequently, it might be concluded that the notion of a conflict between the symbolic and the sign-form itself is indeed absurd. Yet, Gill seemingly fails to duly appreciate that the gift is, according to Baudrillard’s analysis, merely the ‘most proximate example’ of the symbolic discernable today. To be precise, Gill apparently fails to recognise the significance of the distinction between the initial positivity presumed of the symbolic (it is precisely this quality of the symbolic which is most closely approximated by the gift) and the differential structure, i.e., that quality of negative definition, which is characteristic of the sign. Accordingly, although the symbolic/gift association prevails even in Baudrillard’s more recent writings, neither the gift nor the exchange thereof properly describes the symbolic. Thus, in contrast to the unqualified synonymy assumed by Gill, it should be recognised that, whilst it is an admittedly useful example, the function of the idea of the gift in Baudrillard’s work is analogical in relation to that of the symbolic. In other words, although the definition of the symbolic as the order of the gift is pivotal in Baudrillard’s early writings on the topic (indeed, this connection is fundamental to his initial explications of the concept of the symbolic), it is not for no reason that Baudrillard’s references to the symbolic become ever more allusive in his later works; it is in this more developed sense — specifically, as a largely undefined or indeed indefinable other — that the true meaning and significance of the concept of the symbolic lies. In short, too close an association between the symbolic and gift exchange is decidedly unhelpful. Accordingly, if the concept of the symbolic is not synonymous with that of the gift, but is instead principally an allusion to an ultimately indefinable beyond of ‘the code’, we must refute Gill’s argument, for the notion that the symbolic is in essential conflict with language is consequently anything but absurd. (Moreover, it is, of course, in this sense, namely as an indefinable beyond of the code, that the symbolic may be correlated with the Lacanian Real.)

We have established that the Lacanian Real and the Baudrillardian symbolic name voids to which we may only allude. Paradoxically, however, it may be understood that both also yield tangible effects. Just as, in its ‘total exclusion’, the Baudrillardian symbolic ‘never ceases to dismantle the formal structure of the sign’, so “[t]he paradox of the Lacanian Real … is that it is an entity which, although it does not exist (in the sense of ‘really existing’, taking place in reality), it has a series of properties — it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects” (Zizek 1989: 163). Of course, what Zizek says of the Real is equally true of the Baudrillardian symbolic; Baudrillard accords to the symbolic just such an ability to ‘produce a series of effects’. Indeed, in his later writings (e.g., Baudrillard 2001; 2003), Baudrillard holds the symbolic as a radical
potentiality beyond compare, manifest as *singularities*. Consider his contemplation of
the question of resistance to ‘the global system’:

> Who can defeat the global system? Certainly not the anti-globalization movement
> whose sole objective is to slow down global deregulation. This movement’s political
> impact may well be important. But its symbolic impact is worthless. This movement’s
> opposition is nothing more than an internal matter that the dominant system can easily
> keep under control. Positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system, but
> singularities that are neither positive nor negative can. Singularities are not alternatives.
> They represent a different symbolic order. (Baudrillard 2003)

A singularity is neither positive nor negative—it is *ambivalent*. A singularity is
therefore that which evokes the symbolic, the Real.4 That is to say, a singularity, although
knowable in itself, points to the whole realm of unknowability, or, rather, to the
limits of knowledge and of reality, or, more specifically again, to the limits of those
systems which support all of what is known and all of what is—in this case, to the
limits of ‘the global system’.5 This is its radical consequence. A singularity alludes
to the condition of reality as *simulation*, albeit not necessarily by way of any properly
political content; rather, it is radical by virtue of its form. A singularity, in short,
alludes to the deficiency, the lack, the final limit of the social.

Having traced a parity between the Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian
Real, we may now return to the question of ideology. Unsurprisingly, our reappraisal
of Baudrillard’s notion of the symbolic holds considerable implications as regards the
question of ideology. Perhaps most significantly, this interpretation of the concept of
the symbolic means that Baudrillard’s critique of ideology holds true, albeit with
qualification. Baudrillard has shown that the ideological process should not be
understood as a distortion or concealment of some essential truth, since there can be,
in his estimation, no such truth. Yet, the concept of the symbolic has all the
appearance of just such a truth in Baudrillard’s work—this is evident in his assertion
that the ‘semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological
process’. Of course, Baudrillard’s statement here would appear to substantiate
Foucault’s belief that the notion of ideology ‘always stands in virtual opposition to
something else that is supposed to count as truth’. If it is understood, however, that,
‘as a starting point, as a basis’, the symbolic is, like the Real, ‘a positive fullness
without lack’, but that this positive fullness is lost, indeed forever, so soon as the
ideological process of ‘semiological reduction’—i.e., *bifurcation*—takes hold, then
Baudrillard’s analysis is not contradictory. To be precise, as a theoretical point of
departure, the symbolic might indeed represent a truth to which ideology is opposed,

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4 Recall Baudrillard’s explanation of the distinctions between use-value, exchange-value, sign-value and the symbolic, and
specifically his definition of the symbolic as *ambivalent*, in the section ‘Signs versus symbols, or signification versus the
symbolic’, in Chapter Three.

5 If it is understood that the singularity is knowable only in itself, consider the proximity of the concept of the singularity to that
of the Kantian sublime: the sublime is, for Kant, that for which “it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside
itself, but merely in itself” (Kant 1952: 97). We will return to the notion of the sublime in the next chapter.
yet it does not persist as such. It becomes, in contrast, ‘the void, the emptiness created’ by the ‘whole field of value’. For all intents and purposes, the concept of the symbolic hence describes not a truth, but rather the radical impossibility thereof. As a result, we may conceive of ideology such that it does not stand in opposition to something else that is supposed to count as truth: the ideological process comprises not the distortion or concealment of truth, but rather the fabrication of that which is supposed to count as Truth, in spite of the fact that there can be none.

The question of ideology is thus significantly reframed: we should now be concerned not with a critique of Ideology in the (implicitly capitalised) Marxian sense, but rather with a critique of ideologies, in the plural, and with a critique of the structure of the ideological process. As regards the matter of radical commodities, these are important analytic developments: we are beginning to establish a theoretical framework that will allow us to conceive of a politics of resistance in the era of simulation, and in relation to which we may subsequently assess the political significance of apparently radical commodities.

**The hegemonic form of politics**

I have argued that the Baudrillardian concept of the symbolic, like the Lacanian concept of the Real, points to the limits and the fault lines of the social, the hazy lines upon which ostensibly limitless and seamless systems—as of the sign and the economy—stumble. Understood in this way, the symbolic, as the counterpoint to ideology, constitutes, as we have seen, not an essential reality, but rather a negativity, an absence. This itself complicates the question of politics—as I have mentioned, if we are to ascertain the possibility, or otherwise, of a radical politics in the era of simulation, we must firstly give an account of the political that takes into consideration the impossibility of any irreducible basis of the social. In Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s articulation of hegemony, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we find a conception of a form of politics which is specific to society understood in just this way. Like Baudrillard, Laclau and Mouffe diverge from the Marxist tradition in one important regard, namely inasmuch as they explicitly reject the economic determinism of Marx. Yet, Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of the hegemonic form of politics is also, by definition, admitting of that which might be vulgarly referred to as ideological pluralism; their concept of hegemony is therefore in theoretical accordance with what has been said thus far regarding the matter of ideology.

Furthermore, Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of hegemony is illuminating as regards that problem, concerning the matter of agency, which arose out of Baudrillard’s conceptions of ideology and simulation, but which has not yet been addressed. Recall that Baudrillard locates the ideological process outside of the scope of human intervention, and thus effectively accords to ‘the system’ an ahistorical agency—the parity we have drawn between the Baudrillardian symbolic and the Lacanian Real does nothing to annul this problematic. Upon closer inspection, this
problem arises because Baudrillard unnecessarily conflates what should be two distinct questions. Baudrillard’s analysis of the parallel forms of the commodity and the sign is of course incisive; as I have stated, it might be understood that he exposes the so-called (by Zizek) ‘secret’ of these forms. This most useful exposition comprises his recognition of the fact that ideology works by way of a process of bifurcation, i.e., that it is by way of a process of bifurcation that History is transformed into Nature (to borrow a Barthesian turn of phrase). Now, it might be rightly said that the structure of this process of bifurcation is ‘beyond the scope of human intervention’: Saussure has posited that “[n]o society … knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such” (1974: 71)—accordingly, it might be understood that we can only know the bifurcatory structure of the forms of the sign and the commodity as a ‘product inherited from preceding generations’, and that this structure is, for this reason, beyond the scope of our intervention. To say that that structure which facilitates the transformation of History into Nature is beyond the scope of our intervention, however, says nothing of the particularities of that History which would be so transformed—yet, in Baudrillard’s analysis, these matters are conflated. Thus, we might conclude that Baudrillard conflates the doing of ideology, so to speak, with the structure of ideology, i.e., with the structure of the ideological process of bifurcation, and that, in so doing, he mistakes the effective ahistoricalness of the latter for an ahistoricalness of the former also. Laclau and Mouffe, in contrast, do not fail to make this distinction; their conception of hegemony comprises the notion of articulation, which describes precisely the ‘doing’ of ideology, independent from the structure of this process. A proper appreciation of this distinction, however, requires a more complete explanation; let us thus examine their work in more detail.

Unsurprisingly, Marx figures prominently as a point of theoretical departure for Laclau and Mouffe, although they, like I, reject Marx’s historical materialist position. In fact, the authors’ articulation of their theoretical position essentially begins with a rejection of those Marxist assumptions which ascribe exclusively to the proletarian the status of revolutionary subject, and which view social change as a process of evolution that will inevitably culminate in the proletarian revolution and the consequent advent of Communist society—the historical inevitability of the Revolution is never questioned by Marx; the only question which remains open is that of timing. Against the Marxist position, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the plurality of (frequently contradictory) subject positions which emerges under modern capitalism serves to dissolve the revolutionary capacity of the working class. Consequently, political struggle can no longer be viewed as the historical privilege of one group whose identity is economically determined; instead, political struggles—in the plural—emerge on a number of social fronts:

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6 It will be recalled that bifurcation is ostensibly even-handed, but that one term is inherently privileged, thus one term functions as the alibi of the other.
If the worker is no longer just proletarian but also citizen, consumer, and participant in a plurality of positions within the country’s cultural and institutional apparatus; if, moreover, this ensemble of positions is no longer united by any ‘law of progress’…, then the relations between them become an open articulation which offers no a priori guarantee that it will adopt a given form. There is also a possibility that contradictory and mutually neutralizing subject positions will arise. In that case, more than ever, democratic advance will necessitate a proliferation of political initiatives in different social areas… (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 36)

In short, “[t]he era of ‘privileged subjects’—in the ontological, not practical sense—of the anti-capitalist struggle has been definitively superseded” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 87). It is precisely in accordance with such a plurality of subject positions that the hegemonic form of politics arises.

Some clarification is necessary here. Hegemony, for Laclau and Mouffe, does not describe a particular mode of oppression, an historical mode of the imposition of the will of one class upon another. Rather, “[h]egemony is, quite simply, a political type of relation, a form, if one so wishes, of politics” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 139). Hegemonic articulation is therefore not the reserve of an economically superior or otherwise ruling class; correspondingly, the task of resistance is not the reserve of the proletariat, as has been discussed. Indeed, since it is possible for “certain subject positions [to] traverse a number of class sectors” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 66–67), the question of class is all-but-excluded from the hegemonic form of politics. More specifically, if it is understood that “a fragmentation of positions exists within the social agents themselves” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 84), then it might be concluded that the political significance of the working class itself and indeed of all class distinctions is effectively dissolved. In fact, it is necessary to recognise that the hegemonic form of politics arises in parallel with the dissolution of strict class divisions; hegemony is, according to Laclau and Mouffe’s definition, categorically incompatible with the division of the political field along class lines. (The question of class persists alongside hegemonic relations only inasmuch as the same essentially economic factors which once delineated class lines—pecuniary standing, vocation, access to or exclusion from the means of production, ownership of plant and property, etc.—may also influence the types of hegemonic articulations that are possible given different subject positions.) To reiterate, the project posed by orthodox Marxism of revolution by way of the rise of the proletariat assumes a clear-cut and irreconcilable

7 It is not merely the possibility of a privileged revolutionary subject which is dissolved by Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation. As they observe, “[t]he theoretical problematic which we have presented excludes not only the concentration of social conflict on a priori privileged agents, but also reference to any general principle or substratum of an anthropological nature which, at the same time that it unified the different subject positions, would assign a character of inevitability to resistance against the diverse forms of subordination” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 152). In other words, Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective further explicates a thesis that has been argued above: it is precisely such a substratum of an anthropological nature upon which Marx’s critique of the commodity, and hence of the capitalist system, is concentrated, namely that of human need, which is in turn purportedly objectified as the use-value of objects. As we have seen, however, human need is ultimately undefined and indefinable—as Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation reiterates, use-value is a construct which cannot serve as the privileged (or sole) foundation of a critical analysis. (“Human need’ is in fact a master-signifier which recursively organises Marx’s critique of political economy—this concept will be discussed in detail below.)
division of the political field along the proletariat/bourgeoisie line. Yet, by virtue of the plethora of subject positions that have arisen with social advancement in the intervening years, that is, since Marx’s time, political identity can no longer be defined merely in economic terms. It is this ultimate unfixity which is the terrain of hegemony; in fact, we might understand that the hegemonic form of politics is defined by this shifting terrain.

“Using a distinction of Saussure’s, we could say that hegemonic relations are always facts of parole, while class relations are facts of langue” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 51). As is attested to by their account of hegemony in Saussurean terms, Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical formulation owes much to the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in social theory; moreover, theirs is an unambiguously post-structuralist position. The definition of hegemonic relations as facts of parole is revealing. Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony describes a (political) process of articulation:

In the context of this discussion, we will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call moments. By contrast, we will call element any difference that is not discursively articulated. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105)

Hegemonic relations, therefore, consist precisely of (necessarily tendentious) articulations which recast (floating) elements as the moments of a discourse. It is in this way that hegemony constitutes a manner of speech, an acting upon the elements of what is effectively a language. We may thus understand that Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony is admitting of a political agency of the social subject. This, of course, is in stark contrast to the Baudrillardian position. Recall that Baudrillard’s conception of the social describes, according to Gill, ‘a great spectacle of signs obeying logics and forces beyond the scope of human intervention’. That is to say, in Gill’s estimation, Baudrillard “grants agency to an hypostatised social law” (1984: 72), i.e., ‘the code’; he “treats the social subject as passive: the code is the active agent” (Gill 1984: 73). In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis squarely places the social within the scope of human intervention. That agency of the subject of which Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis is admitting, however, should by no means be understood as absolute. It may be the case that a structured totality results from articulatory practices, but all such articulations are themselves partly organised by those other discourses to which they are implicitly (i.e., structurally) related and indeed by those elements upon which they act. In short, every articulation is itself partly structured. What Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation implies, therefore, is a structured agency of the subject. Such a logic of the social is perhaps more succinctly

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8 A close affinity is observable between Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of articulation and the Saussurean definition thereof (see Saussure 1974: 10).

9 In this way, as I intimated in concluding the previous chapter, whilst Baudrillard has made many departures from Marxism, it might be understood that he nevertheless perpetuates that determinism which was so characteristic of the latter.
described by Anthony Giddens’s conception of the “duality of structure”, according to which structure is both “medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises; the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction” (1984: 374). Such a continual remaking of the social—the process of “structuration”, to use Giddens’s terminology (Giddens 1984)—is recognised also by Judith Butler; she observes that “[p]ower is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life” (Butler, in Butler et al. 2000: 14).

This notion of recursive organisation alludes to the fact that no discourse can ever attain a state of finality: “if contingency and articulation are possible, this is because no discursive formation is a sutured totality and the transformation of the elements into moments is never complete” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 106–107). I should emphasise, however, that this incompleteness of the transformation of elements into moments results not from some failing or immaturity of the process of articulation, but rather from the overdetermination of the elements; these are floating elements that can never be conclusively pinned down. This has momentous consequences. In the same instant in which elements are reframed as moments of a discourse, their fundamentally contingent character reciprocally destabilises the social:

The status of the ‘elements’ is that of floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain. And this floating character finally penetrates every discursive (i.e. social) identity. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 113)

To reiterate, because the ‘floating character’ of the elements penetrates every discourse, ‘no discursive formation is a sutured totality’. This accords with our earlier discussion of the Real: it was noted that the concept of the Real names the limit, the lack of the Symbolic order, and it follows that the Symbolic order can never be closed or perfected. Yet, the notion of ‘suture’ begs particular discussion here, for it names such a closure. The notion of suture names a remedy for the social which is, of course, impossible; thus, in aspiring to such a closure, the suture reveals its own impossibility.¹⁰ In Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation, the concept of suture describes just such a ‘double movement’, a pretension to closure which inevitably, simultaneously, emphasises the fundamental lack of the social:

It is this double movement that we will attempt to stress in our extension of the concept of suture to the field of politics. Hegemonic practices are suturing insofar as their field of operation is determined by the openness of the social, by the ultimately unfixed character of every signifier. This original lack is precisely what hegemonic practices try to fill in. A totally sutured society would be one where this filling-in would have reached its ultimate consequences and would have, therefore, managed to identify itself

¹⁰ Whilst its explication is attributed to Jacques Alain Miller, the concept of ‘suture’ is also ever-present, however implicitly, in Lacan’s work (further discussion of the notion of suture can be found in Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 88n).
with the transparency of a closed symbolic order. Such a closure of the social is ... impossible. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 88n)

Thus, we once more see that there is, fundamental to the notion of hegemony, an ultimate unfixity, a thoroughgoing absence of any final and incontestable reality or truth—this is implicit also in Laclau and Mouffe’s argument, discussed above, against the fixity of class boundaries. In short, “[t]he openness of the social is ... the precondition of every hegemonic practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 142). And it is in this way that we may discern a remarkable similarity between Laclau and Mouffe’s vision of the social and that of Baudrillard. Like the Baudrillardian notion of simulation, the field of discursivity upon which a hegemonic politics is played out is a field without any final reference, a field whose closure is impossible. ‘Society’, in Laclau and Mouffe’s view, describes a finally sutured space, coherent, closed, free from the contamination that is the subject—needless to say, however, this is a contradictory and impossible ideal. ‘The social’, in contrast, i.e., the existing, is characterised by an impossible yet relentless quest to attain closure—a quest, that is, to become society: “the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a society, the social only exists ... as an effort to construct that impossible object” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112).11 We witnessed the same above, in Baudrillard’s analysis of the fields of economy and signification: imbalance masquerades as balance, and mere preponderance as universality. It is precisely such manoeuvres—namely, manoeuvres in pursuit of the status of truth, which are played out in spite of the ultimate unattainability of truth—that are described by the concept of hegemony. Indeed, for this reason, the concept of hegemony might be understood as a theory of the political in the era of simulation.

The antagonism of the social
We have contemplated the impossibility of any conclusive suture of the social. Also deserving of mention, however, is that moment in which the social reaches for, but fails to attain, the status of Society, a point of closure. In Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis, this is given a name: ‘antagonism’.

[I]f ... the social only exists as a partial effort for constructing society—that is, an objective and closed system of differences—antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social. Strictly speaking, antagonisms are not internal but external to society; or rather, they constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 125)

In other words, the “‘experience’ of the limit of all objectivity does have a form of precise discursive presence, and this is antagonism” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 122). In spite of the authors’ declaration that ‘antagonisms are not internal but external to

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11 Incidentally, Laclau and Mouffe’s distinction between the social and society is akin to the Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real.
society’, the importance of understanding antagonism as an experience of the limit of the social, and not of an externality, cannot be overstated:

We must consider this ‘experience’ of the limit of the social … as an experience of failure. … But, … this experience of failure is not an access to a diverse ontological order, to a something beyond differences, simply because … [sic] there is no beyond. The limit of the social cannot be traced as a frontier separating two territories—for the perception of a frontier supposes the perception of something beyond it that would have to be objective and positive…. Society never manages fully to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 126–127, my emphasis)

The relationship between Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘antagonism’ and the Lacanian Real is thus patent.\textsuperscript{12} We witnessed above the paradox of the Real, restated here in Zizek’s ‘precise definition of the real object’: it is “a cause which in itself does not exist—which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way” (1989: 163). That is to say,

If the Real is the impossible, it is precisely this impossibility which is to be grasped through its effects. Laclau and Mouffe were the first to develop this logic of the Real in its relevance for the social-ideological field in their concept of antagonism: antagonism is precisely such an impossible kernel, a certain limit which is in itself nothing; it is only to be constructed retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them; it prevents a closure of the social field. (Zizek 1989: 164)

To repudiate the possibility of any universal truth or truths, however, is not to announce a converse universality of contingency, or an ultimate ascendency of antagonism: if contingency were unanswerable, boundless, all of language, communication, economy and society would be impossible. Further, a thoroughgoing negation of all objectivity in the face of antagonism would necessarily presume of the latter an otherness, i.e., effectively, a subversive positivity, yet it is only radical negativity. In other words:

If society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible. This allows us to formulate the following conclusion: if society is never transparent to itself because it is unable to constitute itself as an objective field, neither is antagonism entirely transparent, as it does not manage totally to dissolve the objectivity of the social. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 129)

To this end, Laclau and Mouffe posit the concept of ‘nodal points’, points which may be understood as points of contingent fixity in a domain of radical contingency:

\textsuperscript{12} It should be noted that the interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe’s work as an application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the question of politics is attributable principally to Slavoj Zizek. That is to say, whilst Laclau and Mouffe have themselves compared their concept of nodal points, for example, to Lacan’s point de capiton, and have expressly ‘extended the concept of suture to the field of politics’ (such that it is of principal significance to their conception of hegemonic practices), the connection between their work and that of Lacan is, in their view, not so clear-cut and total as it is from Zizek’s perspective. Judith Butler refers to this in a discussion of the inevitably ‘incomplete’ status of the subject in Laclau and Mouffe’s work: “Zizek has suggested—and Laclau has partially agreed—that the Lacanian ‘Real’ is but another name for this ‘incompletion’” (Butler in Butler et al. 2000: 12, my emphasis).
Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, **nodal points**. (Lacan has insisted on these partial fixations through his concept of *points de capiton*, that is, of privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain. … ) (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112)

Thus, in sum:

Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. **The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.** (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 113)

A number of matters may now be clarified. Firstly, we may now better appreciate the concept of ‘hegemony’, and the scope of what is at stake in such a politics: there can be no mistaking the fact that the hegemonic form of politics comprises a contest between different discourses for the status of truth. The concept of ‘hegemony’ thereby describes the very real power struggles that are to be found in every instance of the social. Moreover, given the impossibility of any final truth or closure, hegemony and the social are effectively one and the same; as Laclau and Mouffe observe, “[t]he social is articulation insofar as ‘society’ is impossible” (2001: 114). On a different note, with regard to the relationship between Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas and those of Baudrillard, it might now be said, more conclusively, that the era of simulation is also the era of hegemony. To be precise, a significant parity is discernable between **nodal points** and **simulacra**; it might be understood that a nodal point, like the simulacrum, is a ‘truth that hides the fact that there is none’. Laclau and Mouffe’s work thus enables us to locate, beneath Baudrillard’s characteristically abstruse nomenclature, and in spite of his misattribution of the operation of articulation to structural forces that are ‘beyond the scope of human intervention’, the nature of the political in the era of simulation.

**Pinpointing the convergence of truth and ideology**

I mentioned, in my introduction to this chapter, that two key matters were to be attended to herein, namely the relationship between ideology and the idea of truth, and the question of political agency in the era of simulation. Although these matters are largely interrelated, the latter has been addressed more comprehensively than the former. Thus, with regard to the relationship between ideology and truth, I would like now to reflect upon the matter of ideology as we have understood it thus far, and illuminate further the structure of the ideological process. In so doing, I will also

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13 The notion of the *point de capiton*—the quilting point—is strongly reminiscent of the Saussurean explication, discussed above, of the manner in which language serves to associate *linguistic units* (arbitrary snippets of the vague plane of sound) with *linguistic values* (equally arbitrary portions of the equally vague plane of human thought). Indeed, one of Saussure’s diagrams explicitly suggests such a process of ‘quilting’ (see Saussure 1974: 112).
address the significance of the Lacanian concept of the *point de capiton*, which was mentioned above.

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the concept of simulation effectively supersedes that of singular truth; so too, however, does it supersede that of ideology. Base and superstructure, truth and ideology, reality and illusion—each pair names the same duality, a duality which is today dissolved; its poles converge. In a similar vein, Zizek observes that

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel (conceptualized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as ‘antagonism’: a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized). The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel. (Zizek 1989: 45)

Thus, to reiterate, the opposition here is not between ideology and reality. Rather, it is social reality, itself necessarily ideological, which wrangles with its own lack, its own limit. Incidentally, we witnessed the conception of such an opposition even in the early work of Baudrillard, namely in his recognition of ‘a single great opposition between the whole field of value and the field of non-value, of symbolic exchange’.

The concept of simulation names an ontological formation in which there is no final truth. There can be no illusions here, because *every illusion is real*. I have argued that Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony describes the form of politics that prevails in an era of simulation; consequently, the question of ideology would appear to be subsumed by that of hegemony, since that which would be understood, from a Marxist perspective, as an ideological illusion, might be more accurately understood as the dominant discourse of a particular historical moment. Yet, this explanation notwithstanding, there is an aspect of hegemonic relations which is indeed redolent of ideology in the Marxian sense, that is, an aspect of hegemonic relations which constitutes the most profound of deceptions. This lies not in the margins of the hegemonic form of politics, but at its very centre. Specifically, every hegemonic articulation revolves, by definition, around a supposed suture of the social, in spite of the impossibility of such a closure. Here lies the correlation: we find in every hegemonic articulation a trace of the deception characteristic of Ideology in the Marxian sense, insofar as every discourse is organised around a point of feigned objectivity, around an illusion of a finality which is, of course, impossible. This point of feigned objectivity constitutes the *point de capiton*. It is in relation to this ‘quilting point’ that otherwise floating *elements* are given meaning and are articulated as the *moments* of a discourse. Yet, whilst the *point de capiton* gives the illusion of

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14 The *point de capiton* is sometimes referred to as the ‘quilting point’—this is the direct translation from the French—or as the ‘master-signifier’. Zizek frequently uses the latter term. Moreover, as we have seen, it may be correlated with the ‘nodal point’ in Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation.
carrying a plenitude of meaning, it in fact holds none. It is, in other words, an empty
signifier, a “signifier without the signified” (Zizek 1989: 99), in relation to which
other signifiers are nevertheless defined—this is the definition of the point de
capiton. It should be emphasised, however, that it is not merely capitalism which
relies upon this illusive kernel; so too does it underlie various Leftist dogmata,
including that of orthodox Marxism itself:

In the last resort, the only way to define ‘democracy’ is to say that it contains all
political movements and organizations which legitimize, designate themselves as
‘democratic’; the only way to define ‘Marxism’ is to say that this term designates all
movements and theories which legitimise themselves through reference to Marx, and so
on. (Zizek 1989: 99)

‘Marxism’ is thus a master-signifier. It is, like ‘Communism’, ‘capitalism’ and others,
an ultimately meaningless signifier which recursively defines all concepts that are
defined in relation to it: “in the ideological space float signifiers like ‘freedom’,
‘state’, ‘justice’, ‘peace’ … and then their chain is supplemented with some master-
signifier (‘Communism’) which retroactively determines their (Communist) meaning”
(Zizek 1989: 102). The point de capiton stands over a lack, it has no foundation
beneath it, yet it paradoxically organises the signifying chain of an ideology. Hence:

This then is the fundamental paradox of the point de capiton: the ‘rigid designator’,
which totalizes an ideology by bringing to a halt the metonymic sliding of its signified,
is not a point of supreme density of Meaning, a kind of Guarantee which, by being
itself excepted from the differential interplay of elements, would serve as a stable and
fixed point of reference. On the contrary, it is the element which represents the agency
of the signifier within the field of the signified. In itself it is nothing but a ‘pure
difference’: its role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative—its
signification coincides with its own act of enunciation; in short, it is a ‘signifier without
the signified’. The crucial step in the analysis of an ideological edifice is thus to detect,
behind the dazzling splendour of the element which holds it together (‘God’, ‘Country’,
‘Party’, ‘Class’ … [sic]) this self-referential, tautological, performative operation.
(Zizek 1989: 99)

We have thus isolated that aspect of hegemonic relations which might be most
accurately deemed ideological. In Zizek’s words, “[t]he properly ‘ideological'
dimension is … the effect of a certain ‘error of perspective’” (1989: 99). Specifically,
because of this ‘error of perspective’, “the element which only holds the place of a
certain lack, is perceived as a point of supreme plenitude” (Zizek 1989: 99). In short,
all hegemonic articulations are ideological inasmuch as each perpetuates, in some
measure, a certain illusory suture of the lack of the social—an illusory suture, that is,
of the fundamental impossibility of Society.

15 In other words, “[i]f we maintain that the point de capiton is a ‘nodal point’, a kind of knot of meanings, this does not imply
that it is simply the ‘richest’ word, the word in which is condensed all the richness of meaning of the field it ‘quilts’: the point de
capiton is rather the word which, as a word, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is,
so to speak, the word to which ‘things’ themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity” (Zizek 1989: 95–96).
Allow me to briefly expand on this. Zizek specifically aligns this ‘error of perspective’, the ideological illusion, with the psychoanalytic concept of ‘transference’:

transference … consists of the illusion that the meaning of a certain element (which was retroactively fixed by the intervention of the master-signifier) was present in it from the very beginning as its immanent essence. We are ‘in transference’ when it appears to us that real freedom is ‘in its very nature’ opposed to bourgeois formal freedom, that the state is ‘in its very nature’ only a tool of class domination, and so on. The paradox lies, of course, in the fact that this transferential illusion is necessary, it is the very measure of success of the operation of ‘quilting’: the capitonnage is successful only in so far as it effaces its own traces. (Zizek 1989: 102)

It is, in other words, this transferential illusion which marks the success of a discursive formation. Incidentally, such an analysis was anticipated by Barthes: Zizek’s observation that ‘the capitonnage is successful only in so far as it effaces its own traces’ is paralleled by Barthes’s recognition of the ex-nomination of the bourgeoisie, i.e., his observation that, ‘as an ideological fact’, the bourgeoisie ‘completely disappears’. Zizek’s transposition of the concept of transference into the realm of social and ideological analysis also grants us a new perspective on the phenomenon of reification: it might be understood that the worker is ‘in transference’ when her labour power is reified, in her own eyes, as a commodity.16

Conclusion

We may thus conclude that both ideology and the political do indeed prevail in the era of simulation; accordingly, so too must the critique thereof. Yet, I should reiterate: what prevails in the era of simulation is neither an Ideology that distorts the Truth, nor a thoroughly ideological system which has superseded truth and reality and which is beyond the scope of human intervention, but conflicting discourses, in the sense thereof explicated by Laclau and Mouffe, each of which aspires, by way of the properly ideological mechanism of transference, to the status of truth.17 For this reason, we may understand that politics in the era of simulation has the character of a

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16 Furthermore, Zizek’s explication of that transferential (ideological) illusion which defines the point de capiton, whereby an illusion of completeness stands in for a lack, a feigned presence for an absence, is also uncannily consistent with Baudrillard’s definition of simulation—recall Baudrillard’s assertion that ‘to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have’.

17 Our analysis of the political should proceed with this distinction in mind. By the same token, however, we should be aware of the foundational assumptions of politico-ideological critique itself. Specifically, I would like to emphasise that Lacanian discourse itself relies upon such assumptions, and these are necessarily carried over when Lacan’s work is used as a basis of social and political critique. Zizek, for example, might refute the possibility of a final truth, but this refutation itself paradoxically assumes, in some measure, the status of such a truth. That is to say, ‘the Real’, which names the limits of the Symbolic, is itself a master-signifier, a point de capiton around which is organised post-Lacanian (if this term might be permitted) political critique, such as that of Zizek and of Laclau and Mouffe. We have heard that the Lacanian Real is discernable only retroactively, from its tangible effects, and then only allusively—it is an impossible cause. The function of the concept of the Real in Lacanian theory, however, mirrors that of the purported Real itself: it is an impossible starting point, it lacks any positive foundation, and yet its consequences are all too real. That is to say, like the number i (the square-root of negative one, $\sqrt{-1}$, a mathematical impossibility which nevertheless finds expression as i), the Real is a purely theoretical construct which facilitates certain theoretical moves and conclusions—specifically, theoretical moves and conclusions which would otherwise be impossible. Herein lies not the paradox but the irony of the Real.
struggle around truth—a struggle, that is, for the articulation of truths, not for the revelation thereof.

Having proposed such a conception of the contemporary character of the political, we must, in the coming chapter, consider its implications as regards the sphere of commodities. More specifically, with regard to the question of radical commodities, we shall contemplate not only the form that a radical politics might take under these circumstances, but also the radical potential which might inhere in the world of commodities.
6. Toward a Politics of the Radical Commodity

In view of our discussion, in the previous chapter, of the impossibility of Society, that is, of the impossibility of the suture of the social, and our earlier discussions of the concept of ‘simulation’, it hardly needs to be pointed out that, since the time of Marx’s seminal critique of the commodity, the problematic of a radical and progressive politics has been dramatically reframed.

For Marx, revolution was necessitated by the exploitation, under capitalism, of the proletariat. In the absence, however, of any fundamental truth of either the object or the subject, according to which the rights and needs of the working class might be privileged, the orthodox Marxist position crumbles, as we have seen. If the social is characterised by contingency and plurality, it follows that no one revolution—such as, according to the Communist perspective, the liberation of the proletariat by way of the abolition of capitalist relations of production—could abolish all inequalities, all crises of the social. “The classic conception of socialism supposed that the disappearance of private ownership of the means of production would set up a chain of effects which, over a whole historical epoch, would lead to the extinction of all forms of subordination. Today we know that this is not so” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 178). Indeed, as has been discussed, we might, after Laclau and Mouffe, conclude that the abolition of all crises of the social, i.e., the realisation of Society, is categorically impossible. Of course, if Society is impossible, then so too is Revolution. And so we must ask: what scope remains for a radical or progressive politics? Moreover, in which direction should such a politics proceed?

Radical democracy in the sphere of commodities

In response to such questions, Laclau and Mouffe propose the notion of ‘radical democracy’. They posit that “the expansion and determination of the social logic implicit in the concept of ‘hegemony’ … will provide us with an anchorage from which contemporary social struggles are thinkable in their specificity, as well as permitting us to outline a new politics for the Left based upon the project of a radical democracy” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 3).

Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of ‘radical democracy’ describes a political project that is not annulled by the impossibility of Society, but which is instead defined by it. Zizek offers the following summary of their position:

[Laclau and Mouffe] emphasize that we must not be ‘radical’ in the sense of aiming at a radical solution: we always live in an interspace and in borrowed time; every solution is provisional and temporary, a kind of postponing of a fundamental impossibility. Their term ‘radical democracy’ is thus to be taken somehow paradoxically: it is precisely not ‘radical’ in the sense of pure, true democracy; its radical character implies, on the contrary, that we can save democracy only by taking into account its own radical impossibility. Here we can see how we have reached the opposite extreme
of the traditional Marxist standpoint: in traditional Marxism, the global solution-revolution is the condition of the effective solution of all particular problems, while here every provisional, temporarily successful solution of a particular problem entails an acknowledgement of the global radical deadlock, impossibility, the acknowledgement of a fundamental antagonism. (Zizek 1989: 5-6)

The notion of ‘radical democracy’ names a conception of democracy which is consistent with the hegemonic form of politics, a project wherein “the essentialism of the totality and of the elements is rejected” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 192–193). The intermediary character of the concept of a ‘radical democracy’ is deliberate. The idea of radical democracy is unspecific, apparently irresolute, yet, in the view of Laclau and Mouffe, this intermediary quality is necessary to the possibility of democracy. On the one hand, an essentialism of the totality would presume the possibility of a final resolution, of a ‘perfect’ democracy, of an ideal Society. An essentialism of the totality presumes, in short, the possibility of a suture of the social—it is just such an assumption which we find in Marx. Yet, any attempt to realise such a suture would spell the end of democracy, for this is nothing other than “a direct path to totalitarianism” (Zizek 1989: 4). More precisely, “the antagonism of civil society cannot be suppressed without a fall into totalitarian terrorism” (Zizek 1989: 4). On the other hand, however, an essentialism of the elements, namely the postulation of a radical and inexorable mutability, would mark the unqualified demise of the political itself.1 For these reasons, the radical democratic position lies between the theoretical poles of (1) the assumption of the possibility of an ultimate closure of the social and (2) the categorical denial of any and all fixity. “Every radical democratic politics should avoid the two extremes represented by the totalitarian myth of the Ideal City, and the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 190). A radical democratic politics therefore recognises, as Zizek has observed, the radical impossibility of Democracy, yet it nevertheless proposes the pursuit, in incremental steps, of some semblance of the same. From a radical democratic perspective, we cannot assume that from any one solution might ensue solutions to all the problems of society; accordingly, we cannot discount the political significance of any ‘provisional, temporarily successful solution’.

This latter observation is especially relevant as regards the question of radical commodities: insofar as it is admitting of the political significance of provisional solutions to particular problems, we might understand that the radical democratic position is also implicitly open to the possibility of a radical commodity. To be precise, the concept of radical democracy allows us to conceptualise a political legitimacy of radical commodities; it constitutes a theoretical position from which such commodities are ‘thinkable in their [radical] specificity’. Consistent with their

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1 A number of critics (e.g., Kellner 1989; Gill 1984) ascribe just such an apolitical (or post-political) position to Baudrillard. Gerry Gill opines that “[a] high or popular Baudrillardism would at best be a-political, non-radical and nihilistic; at worst it could shape up as a cynical and decadent hedonism whereby people immerse themselves in the spectacle, the possibilities and the ironies of a thrilling society heading for catastrophe” (1984: 61–62).
repudiation of the Marxist position, Laclau and Mouffe assert that “there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth’” (2001: 191–192). In accordance with such a renunciation, they state that “it is clearly impossible to identify either the state or civil society a priori as the surface of emergence of democratic antagonisms” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 180). Most pertinently, however, they emphasise that “[t]he same can be said when it is a question of determining the positive or negative character, from the point of view of the politics of the Left, of certain organizational forms” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 180). Here lies the significance of the concept of ‘radical democracy’ as regards the question of radical commodities: where the notion of a radical commodity would be, in the Marxian view, fundamentally contradictory, as has been discussed on a number of occasions, the notion of radical democracy at least facilitates the critique of potentially radical commodity-objects, since the sphere of commodities could not, according to a radical democratic perspective, be deemed as antagonistic per se. In other words, according to a radical democratic perspective, it could not be determined that the commodity-form is, in relation to ‘the politics of the Left’, irredeemably reprehensible; just as there is no privileged point of access to the truth, nor is there any irreconcilably culpable manifestation of untruth.

This proposition, namely that Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of a ‘radical democracy’ is admitting of the sphere of commodities as a possible platform for political action, is bolstered by the authors’ claim that “just as there are no surfaces which are privileged a priori for the emergence of antagonisms, nor are there discursive regions which the programme of a radical democracy should exclude a priori as possible spheres of struggle” (2001: 191–192). In this way, the whole of the social is opened up as the possible terrain of political struggle. And, of course, in spite of all of its complications and contradictions, and the consequences of its structure upon the subject, not to mention the many and varied injustices that are committed in its name, the commodity must be included here. In other words, the world of commodities cannot be excluded a priori as a possible sphere of struggle. Needless to say, this is an analytical development whose importance in relation to the question of radical commodities is unparalleled, since, in sum, the concept of a ‘radical democracy’ tempers that contradiction which inheres in the idea of radical commodities, and so facilitates an analysis of the same.

The radical significance of the logic of equivalence
Regarding the connection between the world of commodities and the concept of a radical democracy, there is another matter which is deserving of a brief mention. To be precise, this is an association between the concept of a radical democracy and the commodity-form, an association which issues namely from their shared dependence

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2 This is in stark contrast to the “classic discourse of socialism [which] reduced the field of the discursive surfaces on which it considered that it was possible and legitimate to operate” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 192).
upon the logic of equivalence. Now, the Marxist tradition is certainly justified in its disparagement of the commodity—the commodity-structure undoubtedly demonstrates a number of worrisome traits, as we have discussed in earlier chapters, and commodity exchange may be recognised as a locus of many social ills. However, despite the problematic character of the commodity-form, we might understand, after Laclau and Mouffe, that the rise of the historical conditions necessary to the formation of the “democratic imaginary” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 159) in fact parallels that of the commodity. That is to say, paradoxically, the rise of the radical imaginary may be linked, in no small measure, to the unrelenting encroachment of the commodity-form into areas of the social that are, in Veblen’s words, ‘not commonly classed as economic’.

As regards the expansion of the commodity-form, Laclau and Mouffe have observed that the penetration of capitalist relations of production, initiated at the beginning of the century and stepped up from the 1940s on, [transformed] society into a vast market in which new ‘needs’ were ceaselessly created, and in which more and more of the products of human labour were turned into commodities. This ‘commodification’ of social life destroyed previous social relations, replacing them with commodity relations through which the logic of capitalist accumulation penetrated into increasingly numerous spheres. (2001: 160–161)

Of course, this passage contains, per se, no real revelations for us, since the question of the ‘commodification of social life’ is one which has figured prominently in our discussions thus far. And yet, the particular description of the growth of capitalism proffered by Laclau and Mouffe emphasises a number of aspects of that process which are most topical. Foremost among these is the commodity-form’s ‘destruction of previous social relations’, for it is this which, according to their perspective, laid the groundwork for the democratic imaginary.

In contemplating the emergence of “new social movements”, Laclau and Mouffe assert that “a good proportion of the new political subjects have been constituted through their antagonistic relationship to recent forms of subordination, derived from the expansion of capitalist relations of production” (2001: 160). In other words, these ‘new social movements’ are a relatively direct product of the radical growth of the commodity-form. Of greater significance, however, than the observation that the commodity-form’s encroach into new realms of the social

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3 Whilst this inquiry may presently seem to be of tangential or incidental relevance to the broader question of radical commodities, a number of matters broached here are of marked significance in relation to themes that we will address in later chapters, particularly the question of the radical significance of brands, which we will tackle in Chapter Eight.

4 Even Marx foresaw, in some measure, this radical expansion of the commodity-form, endowed as he apparently was with a capacity for foresight which exceeded his “immediate historical experience” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 81). Moreover, it is today effectively common knowledge that ‘no domain of individual or collective life escapes capitalist relations’.

5 Notably, Laclau and Mouffe consider ‘new social movements’ to be an “unsatisfactory term [which] groups together a series of highly diverse struggles: urban, ecological, anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional, feminist, anti-racist, ethnic, regional or that of sexual minorities” (2001: 159).
foments corresponding cultures of resistance, is an understanding of the fact that, in
order for the image of democracy to emerge on the horizon of the social, “the
democratic principle of liberty and equality first had to impose itself as the new
matrix of the social imaginary…. This decisive mutation in the political imaginary of
Western societies took place two hundred years ago and can be defined in these terms:
the logic of equivalence was transformed into the fundamental instrument of
production of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 154–155). Compare Baudrillard’s
definition of the logic of the commodity as a ‘logic of equivalence’ with Laclau and
Mouffe’s use of the same term—this is no mere terminological coincidence. The logic
of equivalence which arose as the foundation of the commodity-form, of capitalist
relations, eventually comes, by way of a curious twist, to exert itself as the social
logic of democracy, of egalitarianism. 6 With regard to this, Laclau and Mouffe
observe that

while Baudrillard is right to say that we are ‘ever further away from an equality vis-à-
vis the object’, the reigning appearance of equality and the cultural democratization
which is the inevitable consequence of the action of the media permit the questioning
of privileges based upon older forms of status. Interpellated as equals in their capacity
as consumers, ever more numerous groups are impelled to reject the real inequalities
which continue to exist. This ‘democratic consumer culture’ has undoubtedly
stimulated the emergence of new struggles which have played an important part in the
rejection of old forms of subordination…. (2001: 163–164, my emphasis)

The notion of democracy, in other words, is categorically incompatible with
those ‘previous social relations’ mentioned above, namely those ‘primitive
communities’ to which Marx was wont to refer, or those ‘patriarchal and feudal
orders’ whose demise was charted by Veblen. Under a feudal order, for example,
there would have been no possibility of equality, of democracy, since all social
positions and hierarchical relations were relatively predetermined—the serf may have
dreamt of being a landowner, but she could never aspire to being one. With the rise of
capitalism, however, arose—as we discussed in Chapter Three—the promise of
democracy and equality for all, that is, the promise that every person may be whatever
or whomever he or she wishes. And it is this promise, however spurious it may be in
the context of actual capitalist relations, which foments what Laclau and Mouffe term
the “egalitarian imaginary” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 160). In other words, the rise of
capitalism marks, for Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 155), the end of the ancien régime,
specifically, “the end of a society of a hierarchical and inegalitarian type”, and the
beginning of the “democratic revolution”. What begins as a promise of equality
before the commodity proliferates through all aspects of subjectivity and across the
entire surface of the social. This is “the profound subversive power of the democratic
discourse, which would allow the spread of equality and liberty into increasingly

6 On Baudrillard’s definition of the logic of the commodity as a ‘logic of equivalence’, see the section ‘Signs versus symbols, or
signification versus the symbolic’, in Chapter Three.
wider domains and therefore act as a fermenting agent upon the different forms of struggle against subordination” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 155). That is to say, since ‘there is practically no domain of individual or collective life which escapes capitalist relations’, virtually all objects and practices exceed their singular meaning or significance—they become, in short, overdetermined—and whilst they may thus, admittedly, become sites or instruments of domination, so too may they become sites of struggle. Hence, paradoxically, with the proliferation of the commodity-form comes “the displacement [of the egalitarian imaginary] into new areas of social life” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 165).

As a result of our discussion here, we may begin to appreciate the necessity of the notion of Society to the development of the social, and likewise the necessity of the image of Democracy to all radical democratic projects. Specifically, whilst it may be discounted as an ideological illusion, that image of freedom which is so central to capitalism, and which finds its most patent expression in the consumer society, in fact serves, in some measure, as a positive and subversive model. In other words, although it represents an impossible ideal, the notion of Society serves as a hypothetical yardstick in relation to which the real inequalities of the social may be critiqued. The illusion of a perfect democracy is therefore a ‘necessary fiction’: “although ‘in reality’ there are only ‘exceptions’ and ‘deformations’, the universal notion of ‘democracy’ is none the less a ‘necessary fiction’, a symbolic fact in the absence of which effective democracy, in all the plurality of its forms, could not reproduce itself” (Zizek 1989: 148–149).

The irruption of the symbolic

Given that we are concerned here with the shape that a radical politics might take, it is useful to compare Laclau and Mouffe’s position to that of Baudrillard. We have seen that, as a result of their supposition of the fundamental impossibility of Society, Laclau and Mouffe advocate a political project which, in apparent spite of its radical sentiment, is not focussed on the abolition of the capitalist system, since, according to their estimation, there is no reason to assume that a more desirable system would necessarily arise in its place. In this way, Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of a radical politics differs dramatically from that of Baudrillard, for Baudrillard is concerned only with the destruction of the capitalist system.

Whilst the radical strategy proposed by Laclau and Mouffe proceeds from their analysis of hegemony in a relatively straightforward manner, grasping Baudrillard’s conception of resistance constitutes a much more delicate problem. In contrast to Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of radical democracy, Baudrillard advocates a symbolic resistance to the system of capital. He argues that

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7 For this reason, it might be argued that the debate over the existence, or otherwise, of an infrastructural reality is moot: regardless of whether or not one believes that the consumer society’s image of equality obscures some fundamental reality or truth, we might understand that this image itself fuels the democratic imaginary, and may in this way work against the consumer society.
[capital] is a sorcery of the social relation, it is a challenge to society and should be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral and economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law. (Baudrillard 1988: 174)

Again: “[w]e will not destroy the system by a direct, dialectical revolution of the economic or political infrastructure” (Baudrillard 1993: 36). Power, for Baudrillard, issues from an arrest of the reciprocity of symbolic exchange. Domination, he posits, ‘comes from the system’s retention of the exclusivity of the gift without counter-gift’. Thus, according to a Baudrillardian perspective, one might posit the following elementary analysis of the ‘cultural imperialism’ that is commonly deemed synonymous with US-centric globalisation: gifts of cola and hamburgers, to employ the most stereotypical examples, are given, but no traditional fare is admitted in return. This is consistent with “the seizing of power by the unilateral exercise of the gift” (Baudrillard 1993: 36). In accordance with this conception of the exercise of power, Baudrillard rejects all positive paths of resistance, and particularly the notion that we might propose a positive alternative to the system—he contends, as cited above, that ‘positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system’. In other words, he presumes that such alternatives will inevitably be incorporated into the system. It is for this reason that he instead advocates actions which appeal to the symbolic. Specifically, Baudrillard proposes a utilisation of the system’s own strategy against itself:

If domination comes from the system’s retention of the exclusivity of the gift without counter-gift … then the only solution is to turn the principle of its power back against the system itself: the impossibility of responding or retorting. To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death. Nothing, not even the system, can avoid the symbolic obligation, and it is in this trap that the only chance of a catastrophe for capital remains. … The system must itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide. (Baudrillard 1993: 36–37)

In short, in the Baudrillardian view, the system can be truly challenged only by way of a symbolic gesture that cannot be reciprocated, that is, by way of giving the one gift that cannot be returned, namely death. Herein lies, for Baudrillard, the delicate threat of terrorism.

The matter of terrorism is worthy of discussion, for it is the most prominent example given by Baudrillard of the variety of resistance that he advocates. Regarding the symbolic challenge to the system that terrorism represents, he states:

The system can only respond to this irruption of the symbolic … by the real, physical death of the terrorists. This, however, is its defeat, since their death was their stake, so that by bringing about their deaths the system has merely impaled itself on its own violence without really responding to the challenge that was thrown to it. (Baudrillard 1993: 37)
In the face of the death of a terrorist, he posits, “[t]he system can only die in exchange” (Baudrillard 1993: 38). “Its death at this instant is a symbolic response, but a death which wears it out” (Baudrillard 1993: 38). The concept of the singularity, discussed in the previous chapter, names this irruption of the symbolic, this subversively unilateral gift which we find in terrorism (but not only in terrorism). “Terrorism is an act that reintroduces an irreducible singularity in a generalized exchange system” (Baudrillard 2001). It might be understood that, by virtue of its radical alterity, the singularity points to the contingency of the system, that is, to the speciousness of the system’s implicit claim to the status of universality. This, however, is a notion which deserves closer examination.

**Terrorism as symptom and as ideological fantasy-object**

In order to appreciate the radical significance ascribed by Baudrillard to the symbolic, it is useful to distinguish the singular character of the terrorist act from (1) terrorism understood as a symptom of the social, and from (2) the function of ‘terrorism’ as an ideological fantasy-object. This discussion will allow us to trace points of agreement between the Baudrillardian position and those of Zizek and of Laclau and Mouffe, and so to better appreciate the distinction between the Baudrillardian formula for resistance and the concept of a radical democracy. This discussion will also allow us to further clarify the Zizekian analysis of ideology.

Firstly, the phenomenon of terrorism might be understood as a symptom of the social—a symptom, that is, of the fundamental antagonism of the social. Zizek defines the social symptom as “the point at which the immanent social antagonism assumes a positive form, erupts on to the social surface, the point which it becomes obvious that society ‘doesn’t work’, that the social mechanism ‘creaks’” (1989: 127–128). In other words, “all phenomena which appear … as simple deviations, contingent deformations and degenerations of the ‘normal’ functioning of society (economic crises, wars, and so on), and as such abolishable through amelioration of the system, are necessary products of the system itself—[these are] the points at which the ‘truth’, the immanent antagonistic character of the system, erupts” (Zizek 1989: 128). In the present day, the phenomenon of terrorism is perhaps the archetypal social symptom. Baudrillard accordingly observes that the prevailing global political situation goes much beyond Islam and America, on which one attempts to focus the conflict to give the illusion of a visible conflict and of an attainable solution (through force). It certainly is a fundamental antagonism, but one which shows, through the spectrum of

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8 Strictly speaking, this is but one definition given by Zizek of the symptom. He also describes as ‘symptomatic’ the fact that “every ideological Universal—for example freedom, equality—is ‘false’ in so far as it necessarily includes a specific case which breaks its unity, lays open its falsity. Freedom, for example: a universal notion comprising a number of species (freedom of speech and press, freedom of consciousness, freedom of commerce, political freedom, and so on) but also, by means of a structural necessity, a specific freedom (that of the worker to sell freely his own labour on the market) which subverts this universal notion. That is to say, this freedom is the very opposite of effective freedom: by selling his labour ‘freely’, the worker loses his freedom—the real content of this free act of sale is the worker’s enslavement to capital” (Zizek 1989: 21–22).
America (which may be by itself the epicentre but not the embodiment of globalization) and through the spectrum of Islam (which is conversely not the embodiment of terrorism), triumphant globalization fighting with itself. (Baudrillard 2001)

The standoff between Islam and America may therefore be understood as a symptom of the social itself, an eruption onto the surface of the fundamental antagonism of the social. According to such an analysis, and in spite of America’s claims to the contrary, the so-called Islamic threat is not a hurdle which, if overcome, will allow the perfection of global society; rather, this standoff is symptomatic of the antagonistic essence of a globalisation which is already as perfect as it will ever be. “This terrorist violence is not then reality backfiring, no more than it is history backfiring” (Baudrillard 2001). Terrorism is simply a manifestation of “that which haunts every global order, every hegemonic domination; if Islam dominated the world, terrorism would fight against it” (Baudrillard 2001). The parity between Baudrillard’s position and that of Laclau and Mouffe is therefore clear; Baudrillard posits that “it is the world itself which resists domination” (2001).

Thus, as indicated, the theme of terrorism also raises the question of ideological fantasy. To be precise, ‘Islam’ and ‘terrorism’, which are all-but-synonymous according to the present American ideology, function, in that ideology, as fantasy-objects. The notion of an ideological fantasy-object is derived from the Lacanian concept of the objet petit a; it is, to be precise, the concept of the objet petit a as transposed into the realm of the political by Zizek. The notion of the objet petit a names the ‘chimerical’ object of our desire, or, more specifically, it is the “object-cause of our desire” (Zizek 1989: 96)—it is, in other words, both the object and the cause of our desire. It is a thing within a thing which is ‘in it more than itself’. The objet petit a might be discerned most readily by way of a contemplation of the phenomenon of identity—that of art, for example. To this end, we may ask: what constitutes art? It might be said that anything which is placed in a gallery is art. However, some people would no doubt contest this. Moreover, we know that art may exist outside of such walls. Thus, ultimately, we can only say that art is that which we describe as such. Identity therefore issues from the institution of naming. According to Zizek, “this guaranteeing the identity of an object in all counterfactual situations—through a change of all its descriptive features—is the retroactive effect of naming itself: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object” (1989: 94–95). In short, “[n]aming is necessary but it is, so to speak, necessary afterwards, retroactively, once we are already ‘in it’” (Zizek 1989: 95). This circularity, this recursive organisation, consequently produces a surplus—and here we have located the objet petit a:

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9 It might be noted that Baudrillard’s use of the word ‘antagonism’ here is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s usage thereof.
10 Accordingly, in this standoff between ‘terrorism’ and ‘democracy’, we catch a glimpse of the Real.
11 Notably, in Lacanian nomenclature, ‘objet petit a’, ‘objet a’ and simply ‘a’ are used interchangeably.
That ‘surplus’ in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds is ‘something in it more than itself’, that is to say the Lacanian objet petit a: we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency — because it is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier. (Zizek 1989: 95)

The objet a might, at base, be the product of the recursion of the structure of the signifier, but it is to be found not only in matters of language alone; it also becomes manifest elsewhere. Just as we were unable to pinpoint, in the above exercise, the defining characteristic of art, so too the essential quality of gold, for example, escapes us: “we search in vain in its positive, physical features for that X which makes of it the embodiment of richness; or, to use an example from Marx, it is the same with a commodity: we search in vain among its positive properties for the feature which constitutes its value (and not only its use-value)” (Zizek 1989: 95). Clearly, this is not merely a question of linguistic value; in sum, “the Lacanian objet petit a [is] the chimerical object of fantasy, the object causing our desire and at the same time — this is its paradox — posed retroactively by this desire” (Zizek 1989: 65).

As indicated above, with regard to the question of ideology, the objet petit a takes a specific form, namely that of the ideological fantasy-object. The social or ideological fantasy comprises a filling, with some (purely fantastical) object, of the gap that is the lack in the social. This is an object upon which blame may be laid, so to speak, for society’s woes; it is by way of such a fantasy-object that an ideology effects the illusion of the possibility of a suture of the social, for if the problems of society are associable with a particular thing, then an ideal Society is ostensibly achievable by way of the abolition of that thing. According to the anti-Semitic ideology, for example, the figure of the Jew serves as an objectification of the shortcomings of the social, yet we would, of course, search in vain for that positive quality of Jewry which is responsible for the impossibility of Society. The anti-Semitic vision of the Jew therefore refers not to “a series of effective properties, it refers again to that unattainable X, to what is ‘in Jew more than Jew’” (Zizek 1989: 96–97), i.e., to that thing in ‘Jew’ which is merely the product of the ideological operation of naming, the operation of naming Jewry as the cause of social antagonism. This is a particular variety of the ideological operation of transference that was discussed in the previous chapter; what is described here is an identification of the antagonistic character of the social with a specific object, a fantasy-object, which is thereafter perceived as the cause of that antagonism (yet which retroactively appears, of course, as if it had always been the cause of that antagonism). As Zizek observes,

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12 Zizek’s example here lends some insight into a problematic we contemplated above, namely the irresolution in Marx of the question of value. If we accept the notion of an objet a, we may simply say that a commodity’s value is the recursive effect of its being a commodity.

13 In other words, whilst we might be able to discern that historical moment in which an ideological fantasy-object is posited as such, there is not a modicum of historical contingency about its appearance; upon being established as such, the fantasy-object gives the appearance of having always been the cause of the antagonism of the social.
The notion of social fantasy is therefore a necessary counterpart to the concept of antagonism: fantasy is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is masked. … The function of ideological fantasy is to mask [the] inconsistency [of the social], the fact that ‘Society doesn’t exist’…. (1989: 126–127)

The generic claim discernable at the centre of all ideological fantasies might be summarised thus: it is not that the system itself—the social—is inherently flawed; rather, it is merely the case that the system doesn’t work because of this or that thing. But we know, of course, that “[s]ociety is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of Jews; it is prevented by its own antagonistic nature, by its own immanent blockage, and it ‘projects’ this internal negativity into the figure of the ‘Jew’” (Zizek 1989: 127).

I should emphasise: not merely is the notion of social fantasy a necessary counterpart to the concept of antagonism; likewise the objet a is “the real-impossible correlative of the ‘rigid designator’—that is, of the point de capiton as ‘pure signifier’” (Zizek 1989: 95), which is to say that the ideological fantasy-object is the correlative of the ‘nodal point’. That is to say, whilst the concept of the ‘nodal point’ names that ‘signifier without signified’ in relation to which the elements in a discursive chain are retroactively defined, a nodal point is itself defined, negatively, by its opposition to a particular fantasy-object. Thus, the ‘Jew’ is the fantasy-object which is the correlative of ‘anti-Semitism’, bourgeois property is the correlative of ‘Communism’, and ‘terrorism’ (or ‘Islam’), to return the topic thereof, is the correlative of ‘democracy’ (or ‘America’). In each of these oppositions, the ideology encapsulated by the latter term (the nodal point) is defined considerably, if not principally, by its opposition to the former term (the fantasy-object)—recall Saussure’s assertion that the ‘most precise characteristic’ of a linguistic value ‘is in being what the others are not’. To reiterate, each ideology relies upon some element (its fantasy-object), the abolition of which will ostensibly result in the emergence of Society: according to the Communist perspective, the abolition of bourgeois property relations will result in the emergence of Communist Society; according to the present American perspective, the abolition of terrorism will result in the emergence of democratic Society (‘democratic’, that is, according to the American definition thereof). The circularity of this movement (for example, the definition of ‘terrorism’ as that which prevents ‘democracy’ and the definition of ‘democracy’ as that which is prevented by ‘terrorism’) is representative of the interrelationship between the ideological process of capitonnage and the ideological fantasy, or the interrelationship between the nodal point and the fantasy-object. Zizek accordingly states that “another formula of the basic procedure of the ‘criticism of ideology’” comprises a detection, “in a given ideological edifice, [of] the element which represents within it its own impossibility” (1989: 127).

Whilst we have recognised that these objects of ideological fantasy are not “the positive cause of social negativity” (Zizek 1989: 127), we should not overlook the fact that they might nevertheless coincide with eruptions of that social negativity, that
is, with *symptoms* of the social. Indeed, it might be understood that the ideological procedure is all the more effective in cases of such coincidence, for the ideological fantasy in this way appears all the more plausible. Of course, the object/phenomenon that is terrorism is perfectly representative of such a coincidence.

**The radicalism of the sublime**

Let us return now to the question of the Baudrillardian conception of resistance to ‘the system’. Recall Baudrillard’s assertion that the ‘only solution is to turn the principle of its power back against the system itself’, that is, to ‘defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death’. We might understand that the notion of the singularity names such a gift—recall Baudrillard’s claim that ‘positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system, but singularities that are neither positive nor negative can’. Further, we might understand that the notion of the singularity names which alludes to the self-referentiality of the system itself, and thus to the system’s limit, its lack—where universality was supposed, contingency is revealed (or, more precisely, intimated).14 We might thus appreciate the radical potentiality of the singularity: it stands to reveal the *simulated* character of truth. Of course, this radical significance does not issue from some positive—i.e., properly political—aspect of the singularity, but instead from its character as a *sublime* object.

This term, ‘sublime’, is a useful one, but also a loaded one; it is, for this reason, deserving of comment. Zizek states that “[t]he Sublime is … the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable” (1989: 203).15 This is the sense in which I shall make use of the term. This notion of ‘the sublime’ might, however, be expanded upon. Zizek states: “[a]s to the relationship between the Beautiful and the Sublime, Kant, as is well known, conceives of beauty as the symbol of the Good; at the same time, he points out that what is truly sublime is not the object which arouses the feeling of sublimity but the moral Law in us, our suprasensible nature” (1993: 46). He continues:

The problem with the sublime object (more precisely: with the object which arouses in us the feeling of the Sublime) is that it *fails* as a symbol; it evokes its Beyond by the very failure of its symbolic representation. So, if Beauty is the symbol of the Good, the Sublime evokes—what? There is only one answer possible: the nonpathological, ethical, suprasensible dimension, for sure, but the *suprasensible, the ethical stance, insofar as it eludes the domain of the Good*—in short: radical Evil, Evil as an ethical attitude. (Zizek 1993: 47)

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14 The signifier, to take the most primary example, has no ‘natural’ place, no preordained and incontestable necessity; it is the spurious character of the apparent naturalness of the structure of the sign to which the singularity alludes.

15 No utilisation of the term ‘sublime’ could properly proceed without some contemplation of the Kantian sublime. The sublime, for Kant, is that “in comparison with which all else is small” (1952: 97). “If … we call anything not alone great, but, without qualification, absolutely, and in every respect (beyond all comparison) great, that is to say, sublime, we soon perceive that for this it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a greatness comparable to itself alone” (Kant 1952: 97). Since the Kantian sublime names that for which an appropriate standard can only be found in itself, a congruence may be drawn between this and the Baudrillardian concept of the singularity.
This, in turn, requires explanation. The notion of ‘radical Evil’ is also derived from the work of Kant, but, as Zizek observes, Kant, in his conception thereof, “reject[s] the hypothesis of ‘diabolical Evil’” and, in so doing, “ retreats from the ultimate paradox of radical Evil, from the uncanny domain of those acts which, although ‘evil’ as to their content, thoroughly fulfil the formal criteria of an ethical act” (Zizek 1993: 95). For Zizek, this ‘domain’ is exemplified by left-wing totalitarian regimes; he states that “left-wing totalitarians should not be dismissed as cases of disguising selfish interests under virtue’s clothes, because they really act for the sake of what they perceive as virtue and they are prepared to stake everything, including their lives, on this virtue” (Zizek 1993: 100–101). Thus, that which Kant names ‘diabolical Evil’, and so excludes from his formulation, namely evil acts committed in the name of (that which is understood as) Good, constitutes, in Zizek’s estimation, the proper extent of the notion of ‘radical Evil’. Yet, it is important to recognise that “[t]his diabolical Evil, the ‘unthought’ of Kant, is stricto sensu unrepresentable: it entails the breakdown of the logic of representation, i.e., the radical incommensurability between the field of representation and the unrepresentable Thing” (Zizek 1993: 101). Of course, this ‘unrepresentable Thing’ is the Real. So, to précis Zizek’s analytic moves here, the sublime object is, strictly speaking, ‘the object which arouses in us the feeling of the Sublime’, the Sublime being that which evokes radical Evil, and radical Evil, if understood, after Zizek, to be inclusive of the Kantian ‘diabolical Evil’, entails the radical incommensurability between the field of representation and the Real. In short, to return to the earlier formulation, the sublime object is that which ‘provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable’. In accordance with this, if the Baudrillardian singularity is akin to the Zizekian sublime object, it may be understood as that which ‘entails the breakdown of the logic of representation’, i.e., as that which alludes to the limits of the whole edifice of simulation and so to the contingency of ‘reality’—this, of course, is consistent with what was said above, and in the previous chapter, with regard to the radical significance of the singularity. Herein lies, in my opinion, the essence of Baudrillard’s radicalism: what he advocates is the most subversive and the most radical of struggles, a struggle not merely for a transformation of the system, however extensive, but rather for its thoroughgoing dissolution; he appeals to the radicalism of the sublime.

In the sense in which I make use of the term, it might be understood that the sublime names the radical violence of the Real. The theme of violence, however, is itself most important here, for it is in relation to the matter of violence that a shortcoming of the radical strategy proposed by Baudrillard might be pointed out. I shall explain. Let us return, for a moment, to the theme of terrorism; specifically, let us focus, briefly, upon that which must be the archetypal instance of terrorism, namely the events of September 11, 2001. As cited above, Baudrillard argues that the system, by responding violently to a terrorist act, ‘merely impales itself on its own violence without really responding to the (symbolic) challenge that was thrown to it’.
In the example of 9/11, the system (represented, in this instance, by the US administration) indeed answered with a reply that failed to address the question asked of it (although, unsurprisingly, it made every effort to give the appearance of doing so). Upon closer consideration, however, the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, and the ensuing ‘war on terror’, point to the delicate nature of the strategy that Baudrillard advocates.

The problem with the mode of radicalism championed by Baudrillard lies in the fact that such events as would supposedly ‘reintroduce an irreducible singularity’ into the system are never purely singular. In other words, their singular, radically subversive quality never comprises their whole; the singularity might, in its theoretical purity, be irreducible, but the terrorist act, for example, is not. Baudrillard argues that we must ‘displace everything into the sphere of the symbolic’; he posits that ‘there is no question here of real violence or force’. Now, it may be true that real violence and force play no part in the sphere of the symbolic; in the act of said displacement, however, there is invariably some question of ‘real’ violence—and here lies the problem. To be precise, that thing which would be a singularity, that thing which would ‘displace everything into the sphere of the symbolic’, invariably shares some commonality with the dominant order; because of this, this ostensibly singular thing is vulnerable to incorporation into or reinterpretation by that order which it would otherwise seek to oppose. For example, it might indeed be understood that the events of 9/11 were a symbolic affront to the system; they constituted, in so many ways, a radically subversive act, a gift that could not be reciprocated. Yet, these frightful events were nevertheless ultimately accommodated by the system; they might have constituted an unanswerable gesture, but they were nonetheless parried by a deft act of dissimulation, that is, by an illusory reciprocation. This was made possible by the fact that there was, central to the terrible gift of 9/11, a point of commonality with the system, an element to which the US administration could relate, namely real—i.e., corporeal—violence. It was of course this violence—and precisely not the symbolic challenge—to which the US reacted. It is for this reason that we may understand that the US administration’s response to the events of 9/11 constituted an answer to a question that was never asked. Conversely, of course, the question that was asked—a critique of the United States’ own policy of global hegemony—remained unanswered. In other words, that which might be understood as the true significance of the events of September 11 was lost because the attacks were not purely singular: the (sizable) element therein of corporeal violence was something to which the US administration could relate and to which it was able to respond, indeed exclusively. Consequently, that symbolic challenge which the terrorists’ acts might have constituted was quickly buried beneath rhetoric.

Bearing these observations in mind, we should not be too ready to celebrate the radical potential of the singularity. Indeed, regarding the fragility of the singularity, i.e., the sublime object, Zizek offers a most pertinent insight. (Recall that I have traced a synonymy between the concepts of the singularity and the sublime object.)
“The sublime object”, he states, “is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object—it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen” (Zizek 1989: 170). It is therefore not the case that the (radical, subversive) sublimity of the singularity is incorporated into the system; rather, it loses its status as such, or, more accurately, it retreats, abandoning its vulgar host, with which the system may thereafter do what it will. In relation to the above discussion, the sublimity of terrorism (or, more precisely, the capacity of the singular terrorist act to arouse in us the feeling of the sublime) is lost when its corporeity is taken at face value. I should emphasise, however, that the more important point here lies not in the observation that the sublime object is dissolved rather than incorporated, but in the dramatic fragility which Zizek accords to it, that is, in his assertion that it can ‘persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state,’ etc. In view of this, we have good reason to doubt the efficacy of Baudrillard’s radical strategy.

Two paths of resistance: the hegemonic and the sublime

As I indicated earlier, the strategies of resistance proposed, on the one hand, by Laclau and Mouffe and, on the other, by Baudrillard could hardly be more sharply opposed. We are faced here with two paths of resistance, two modes of resistance, which we might understand, respectively, as the hegemonic and the sublime. With regard to the former, Laclau and Mouffe avow that

> no hegemonic project can be based exclusively on a democratic logic, but must also consist of a set of proposals for the positive organization of the social. If the demands of a subordinated group are presented purely as negative demands subversive of a certain order, without being linked to any viable project for the reconstruction of specific areas of society, their capacity to act hegemonically will be excluded from the outset. This is the difference between what might be called a ‘strategy of opposition’ and a ‘strategy of construction of a new order’. (2001: 189)

In view of this, we might once more contemplate the importance of the notion of Society to a radical democratic politics. Whilst Laclau and Mouffe hold that “[t]he advancing of a project for radical democracy means … forcing the myth of a rational and transparent society to recede progressively to the horizon of the social” (2001: 191), it must be emphasised that this myth should not, in their view, be expunged entirely, “[f]or even though impossible, this remains a horizon which … is necessary in order to prevent an implosion of the social and … the disappearance of the political” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 188). To reiterate, although the notions of Society and Democracy name unattainable ideals, these ideals are nevertheless crucial to the project of a radical democracy, insofar as they lend some focus to a radical politics and serve to orient ‘projects for the reconstruction of specific areas of society’; thus, the ‘universal notion of democracy’ is indeed, as Zizek observed, a ‘necessary fiction’. Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘strategy of construction of a new order’
therefore belongs to an interspace between the impossibility of a transcendent or final positivity, and the void of a radical negativity. That is to say, “the hegemonic forms of politics always suppose an unstable equilibrium between [the radical] imaginary and the management of social positivity; but this tension, which is one of the forms in which the impossibility of a transparent society is manifested, should be affirmed and defended” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 190).

In short, Laclau and Mouffe contend that ‘a set of proposals for the positive organization of the social’—for which the idea of Society, although it names an impossibility, serves as a guiding principle—should underlie any radical project; the absence of such risks the ‘implosion of the social’ and the ‘disappearance of the political’. Accordingly, Baudrillard’s position would be denounced by Laclau and Mouffe as a ‘strategy of opposition’. There can be no mistaking the disparity between these positions. It might be recalled that Laclau and Mouffe contrast their notion of a project for radical democracy with programmes which would seek a global solution-revolution, such as that of Marx; incidentally, Baudrillard’s revolutionary blueprint has more in common with the latter than the former. What Baudrillard proposes, however, might be more accurately understood as a global dissolution-revolution. Here lies the dangerous paradox of Baudrillard’s position: he, like Marx, advocates the deposition of the capitalist system, yet, unlike Marx, he proposes no alternative which might arise in its place. His position is, in essence, one of fatalism. This is a fact which he himself admits, albeit with the following qualification: “it’s not fatalism in the passive sense: it’s the idea that there is the possibility of another game” (Baudrillard, in Williamson 1980: 313). As one might predict, he gives no indication of what this other ‘game’ could comprise; he simply maintains, as we know, that ‘positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system’; he merely appeals to the radical potential of an allusive ‘symbolic law’. Yet, the singularity, which would evoke such a law, and so allude to the fundamental contingency of the present system, is itself fragile, ephemeral. As we have seen, the radical alterity of the singularity, and thus the symbolic challenge that it is supposed to represent, stands to be too readily neutralised by system, by virtue of the fact that it is ‘an object which cannot be approached too closely’. 16 Thus, in spite of Baudrillard’s claims to the contrary, we might conclude that singularities cannot defeat the dominant system. We might, in other words, concur with the assertion of Laclau and Mouffe that there is nothing which is “absolutely radical and irrecuperable by the dominant order, and which constitutes an absolutely guaranteed point of departure for a total transformation” (2001: 169). 17 And so it might be said, in the final analysis, that the radical strategy proposed by Baudrillard is purely speculative, i.e., that the vague ‘possibility of

16 Baudrillard apparently fails to appreciate this, an oversight which comes as something of a surprise, for he is rarely one to underestimate the resilience and the tenacity of the system.

17 Of course, Laclau and Mouffe also maintain that, “[c]ertainly, there is nothing which permanently assures the stability of an established order” (2001: 169).
another game’ does not constitute a sufficiently substantial point of departure for a radical politics.

**Relocating a politics of resistance**

It is presently necessary to recap all that has been discussed thus far. Two basic streams of critique have become apparent during this genealogical foray: (1) a critique of the commodity-structure, particularly with regard to its complicity in ideology, and (2) a critique of the social relations that arise around the exchange of objects, specifically the relations of consumption. Marx, of course, is central to the former; Veblen, in my estimation, to the latter. Characteristic of the Marxian position is a belief in the possibility of Society: Marx presumes that, given the rise of the proper material conditions, an ethic of cooperation and camaraderie is an historical inevitability. His view of the commodity, however, is most disparaging. Not only does Marx deem the commodity-form to be a mechanism of exploitation, but so too does he view it as a pollution of the social; he perceives relations based around the commodity-form to be impoverished, dehumanising. Accordingly, from the Marxian perspective, the idea that an oppositional politics might be positively expressed in the sphere of commodities would be patently contradictory.

Veblen, in contrast, holds an essentially pessimistic view of society: humankind, from Veblen’s perspective, is characterised by competitiveness, by a relentless one-upmanship—in this way, Veblen’s work anticipates the conception proffered by Laclau and Mouffe of a fundamental antagonism of the social. Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* marks a point of discontinuity in the analysis of the commodity, which is to say that his analysis approaches the question of commodity exchange from an angle that bears little resemblance to the Marxist tradition: the habits of consumption observed by Veblen certainly have their foundation in the pecuniary, but the resemblance to Marx ends with their shared interest in the economic—we find in Veblen’s work none of that economic determinism which is so characteristic of Marx.\(^8\) As a result, but rather surprisingly nonetheless, it is in Veblen that we discover a first glimmer of possibility as regards the expression of an oppositional politics in the realm of the commodity. Veblen’s perspective extends the agency of the subject before the object, albeit in a qualified way, inasmuch as some degree of subjective expression is implicit in his conception of conspicuous consumption.

As we have seen, Marx’s analysis of the commodity takes the utility of objects—their use-value—as its principal point of reference; because of this, his analysis is, as Gill has observed, ‘blind to the cultural meanings, the symbolic significance of objects, and the ritual elements’ of their exchange. Veblen’s analysis, in contrast, is certainly not lacking in this regard. Indeed, because it is concerned with

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\(^8\) It might be argued that Veblen does not offer a theory of the social so comprehensive as Marx’s base/superstructure thesis, and this may be true, but there is nevertheless discernable in Veblen’s work, as I have noted elsewhere, an assumption of an invidious human nature—distinctly Nietzschean in its cynicism—which serves, in his analysis, as the organising force of the social.
the use of objects as indicators of status, Veblen’s text acutely anticipates the semiological analysis of objects—a seminal instance of which we reviewed in Barthes’s *Mythologies*. In Barthes’s analysis, however, we find a problematic assumption akin to that which is discernable in Marx: although Barthes specifically focuses upon those cultural meanings which Marx overlooked, he, like Marx, assumes an irreducible truth of the object. Specifically, where Marx takes use-value as the single, irreducible truth of the object, Barthes presumes a single, denoted meaning of the object-as-sign—thus, neither Marx’s analysis nor that of Barthes adequately describes the polysemic character of objects today.

Divergent as they may appear, we find that the questions posed by both Marx and Veblen are in fact reconciled, at least in part, in Baudrillard’s work (Baudrillard’s early work may also be interpreted as a continuation of Barthes’s project): Baudrillard advances Marx’s analysis of the ways in which relations of power are structurally perpetuated, but, where Marx was concerned exclusively with the sphere of production, Baudrillard turns, like Veblen, to that of consumption. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the theoretical perspectives of Baudrillard and Veblen: while the question of structure never really arises for Veblen, that motive of emulation which underlies conspicuous consumption would, in the Baudrillardian view, be held as a structural product of ‘the system’. That is to say, Baudrillard effectively grants agency exclusively to the system itself.

Ultimately, in the Baudrillardian view, the idea that a politics of resistance might be acted out through the production of commodity-objects, of all avenues, would be incongruous, to say the least. And yet, we find in Baudrillard an argument which is central to the possibility of a radical commodity, namely the observation that no one logic necessarily governs the exchange of objects: he observes that multiple logics “can mingle, often contradictorily, on the plane of one object alone” (1981: 69). In other words, no object can ever be arrested purely as a commodity, as a sign, or as an instrument—these logics invariably coexist. Yet, while the various ‘logics’ explicated by Baudrillard—specifically those of use-value, exchange-value and sign-value, after Marx and Saussure—are certainly valuable to a sociology of objects, it is not only the case that none of these logics could alone define an object; rather, the three together are also inconclusive. Laclau and Mouffe observe that “[t]he dissolution of the differential character of the social agent’s positions through the equivalental condensation, is never complete” (2001: 129); we might similarly conclude that the equivalental logics of use-value, exchange-value and sign-value never pin down the radical ambivalence of objects. Understood in this way, the different logics delineated by Baudrillard are compatible with the idea of social logics posited by Laclau and Mouffe: “it is no longer a case of foundations of the social order, but of social logics, which intervene to different degrees in the constitution of every social identity, and which partially limit their mutual effects” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 183). In other words, a social agent might engage with an object in a multiplicity of ways; thus, no one logic of the object is ever perfectly coherent, ever
wholly free from contradictions or excess. Accordingly, the logics of utility, of the commodity and of the sign cannot, whether taken alone or in unison, conclusively describe late-capitalist object-exchange. And so, while it is not the case that the sphere of commodities constitutes an optimal site for the actualisation of a radical or progressive politics, we might understand that, by virtue of the multiple and nebulous logics that may define any exchange relation, a radical politics is not definitively excluded from the world of objects.

Incidentally, we have witnessed the rise of this multiplicity of logics, albeit indirectly, implicitly. The writings that have been discussed in this genealogy span a significant period of the history of capitalism. Of course, these writings are not ahistorical (although they might aspire to being so); as a result, they collectively document a fundamental shift in the mode of the encroachment of the commodity-form. That process or phenomenon which is central to the capitalism of Marx’s day, for example, such as is evidenced in his criticism of the British rule in India, might be understood as the expansion of the commodity-form. In contrast, that which is chronicled/critiqued by Baudrillard might be understood as the intensification of the commodity-form. These modes of the advance of the commodity-form are respectively associable with what Michel Aglietta has labelled ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ regimes of accumulation (1979; cited in Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 160).

As Laclau and Mouffe observe, ‘intensive’ regimes of accumulation are “characterized by the spread of capitalist relations of production to the whole set of social relations, and the subordination of the latter to the logic of production for profit” (2001: 160). (Consider here Baudrillard’s assertion that “everything in monopoly capitalist society—goods, knowledge, technique, culture, men, their relations and their aspirations—everything is reproduced, from the outset, immediately, as an element of the system, as an integrated variable” (1981: 87).) This thoroughgoing permeation of the social by the commodity-form is most significant, for although it may be motivated by the production of profit, it also results in an overdetermination of the object, and it might be understood that this overdetermination gives rise to the possibility of radical commodities. Whilst the object of Marx’s day was not solely a commodity—it may also have been an object of utility, a gift, etc.—object exchange in the contemporary milieu is nevertheless more complex; it is characterised by a virtual supersaturation of competing logics and significations. It might, in other words, be said that the polysemy of the object is at an all-time high. For this reason, the expression of a radical politics in the sphere of commodities becomes possible (if only by virtue of the contemporary inevitability of such an intersection).  

We might thus return to the concepts of strategy and tactic, as defined by de Certeau. These concepts are significant for two reasons. Firstly, by virtue of the

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19 The question of the overdetermination of the object will be discussed further in Chapter Eight, in relation to the institution of branding.
notion of place which is central to the distinction between the two concepts: the problem of radical commodities entails, in no small measure, a question of space, albeit not (only) in the physical sense thereof—we might understand that political struggle today consists of contests in and for cultural spaces, linguistic spaces, et cetera. In other words, while it might well be case that everything is already internal to ‘the system’, as Baudrillard has argued, it may nevertheless be understood, after de Certeau, that anything might also become a site upon which a politics of resistance is played out—this reinforces the possibility of a radical commodity. Secondly: we might make especial use of the concepts of strategy and tactic by associating them with production and consumption respectively; the former would thus be characterised by access to the means of production, the latter by an exclusion therefrom. The notions of strategy and tactic would therefore describe those different modes of hegemonic articulation which are possible in the spheres of production and consumption respectively. In relation to strategies and tactics, however, radical commodities belong to something of an interspace, as has been stated. Thus, while we have associated strategies with production and have defined tactics as a resistance through consumption, radical commodities are, paradoxically, the manifestation of a resistance through production. Effectively transposing the tactic of la perruque into the sphere of mass-cultural production, those who produce radical commodities introduce into that sphere ‘a way of turning it to their advantage that obeys other rules’. Moreover, it is in this way that radical commodities might effect change in the social: if structure is not only the medium but also the outcome of ‘the conduct it recursively organises’, as Giddens has observed, then the production of radical commodities might indeed be able to effect structural change, i.e., substantive social change. To give one example, and so to anticipate the thesis of Chapter Nine, if the values implicit in or propagated by way of radical commodities are ‘incorporated’ into the system, then such commodities may indeed be able to make a ‘real’ difference (even if this difference is unpredictable in its character and typically slight). In other words, the production of radical commodities might be able, in this limited way, to bring about a system which, at least in part, ‘obeys other rules’.

Having summarised my argument as regards the possibility of a radical commodity, it is necessary to briefly revisit what has been said with regard to radical strategies, de Certeau’s definition notwithstanding. As we have seen, Baudrillard evokes the symbolic as the first and last resort of politics, the implication being that appeals to the symbolic transcend an otherwise impotent politics (i.e., a politics which

Incidentally, as it pertains to the realm of objects, it might be understood that the notion of hegemony posited by Laclau and Mouffe describes the articulation of objects in accordance with one discursive position or another, thus that it is, as a description of a form of politics, perfectly compatible with the notions of strategy and tactic. The concepts of strategy and tactic are also important, however, insofar as de Certeau thereby identifies different modes of the agency of the subject. Unlike the Baudrillardian analysis of the political, which, as has been noted, accords agency exclusively to the system itself, neither the notion of the strategy nor that of the tactic denies the agency of the subject. That is to say, even the notion of the tactic, which de Certeau describes as an ‘art of the weak’, admits an agency of the subject; the two complementary concepts simply name different modes of agency, which are respectively defined by a delimitation of place, or by a lack thereof.
is already wholly internal to the dominant order). This is something of a politics beyond politics, which I have associated with the notion of the sublime. However, we have also contemplated the shortcomings of this strategy, and indeed a parity is discernable here: just as the subject preserves itself in the face of the dominant system through a tactical consumption which reconfigures the products of that system, so too does the system preserve itself in the face of a symbolic challenge by reframing the material thereof, such as is exemplified by governmental reciprocation to terrorism, that is, by a reciprocation which is utterly corporeal, vulgarly political and thus ultimately altogether removed from the symbolic. In short, the system’s parrying of a symbolic challenge is analogous to the tactical mode of consumption. Accordingly, the mode of resistance proposed by Baudrillard is not only theoretically ambiguous but also practically emasculated. (As Gill observes, “[f]or all its grand abstract inclusiveness as a political project, all we are given by Baudrillard as concrete examples of such a politics are the revolutionary gestures and graffiti of May 1968, or the spontaneous utopian acts of revolt by marginalized groups such as women, blacks, or youth” (1984: 67–68).) Of course, a wholly positive solution is equally impossible: the pursuit of the suture of the social is quintessentially ideological, and approaches totalitarianism besides.\(^2\) We might return, therefore, to that which is described by Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of ‘radical democracy’, namely the struggle not for one positive solution, but rather for a \textit{plurality} thereof, solutions which must, moreover, acknowledge their own radical contingency.\(^2\)

In concluding, however, I should state that we ought to be somewhat wary of the idea of radical democracy. While the concepts of hegemony and radical democracy are immensely useful in terms of their applicability to the sphere of commodities, and to the question of radical commodities in particular, there are reasons to be sceptical of radical democracy as a broader political project. For example, as Barbara Epstein (1996: 129) posits, “[t]he turn toward radical democracy involves a turn away from class as a key category of left politics, and also a loss of interest in politics or the question of who controls states (and other governing institutions) and what policies they produce”. Indeed, in spite of its usefulness as regards the question of radical commodities, the very ease with which the notion of radical democracy may be adapted to the sphere of commodities is itself cause for concern. To be precise, given its lack of specificity, a programme for radical democracy might be all-too-easily reconciled with the properly capitalistic pluralism of the consumer society, thus it might function as an ersatz of politics, and as a most troubling distraction from more important political matters, such as those mentioned

\(^{21}\) So far as this pertains to the question at hand, no object—whether commodified or not—could ever be perfectly virtuous, or perfectly subversive.

\(^{22}\) I should, however, reiterate: just as the notion of Society represents a necessary horizon here, so some element of a politics of the sublime is fundamental to the notion of a radical democracy. It is precisely this element which constitutes an acknowledgement of the radical impossibility of Democracy, and which thus distinguishes a project for a radical and plural democracy from, on the one hand, an alternative totalitarianism and, on the other, from a revolution that is simply internal to the system.
by Epstein. On a related note, as David Trend (2006: 16) observes, some critics “claim that radical democracy represents little more than a new name devised by disaffected socialists, who are drifting toward liberal democracy but can’t bring themselves to embrace it”. Yet, most importantly, an ability to recognise one form of politics should not come at the expense of an ability to recognise others.
Part II – For a Politics of Radical Commodities
7. Delineating the Radical Commodity

I have been concerned with tracing a genealogy of the radical commodity; by way of this genealogical work, I have proffered an argument for the possibility of radical commodities. Now, however, I shall turn my attention toward those contradictions of radical commodities which are discernable through empirical analysis. These contradictions are related, of course, to the structural problematic that I have previously focused upon, yet critical theory can only hint at the many and varied complications which arise around radical commodities in practice. Accordingly, this chapter is principally concerned with the empirical analysis of radical commodities—specifically, with analyses of the products of Rage Against The Machine, Michael Moore, Naomi Klein, The Body Shop, Adbusters and Freitag. I shall also define different varieties of radical commodity, which is to say that I will delineate here the different ways in which radical and critical projects might be manifest in commodities.

For a taxonomy of radical commodities

Before delving into an examination of the complexities of radical commodities, I would like to establish some terminological, hence conceptual distinctions. Specifically, the terms I shall use in reference to different varieties of commodity are: ‘radical’, ‘ethical’, ‘radically projected’, ‘ethically projected’ and ‘subversive’. These classifications are almost all compatible with one another—the exception here is the category of subversive commodities, for such commodities are, according to my definition, neither radically projected nor ethically projected.

Firstly, however, the namesake of this study: as I have stated before, I use the term ‘radical commodities’ to refer to objects which communicate a social or political critique, or which otherwise embody, in some measure, a radical politics. The category of radical commodities is that under which the others fall. I deem ethical commodities to be radical, insofar as they embody an implicit critique of the ethic of the status quo. That is to say, in view of the frequently dubious practices carried out in the name of capital, it may be understood that ethical commodities represent a challenge to the dominant order. (I should point out that I have no intention of attempting to define ethicality as it pertains to the production of commodities. I intend simply to make use of received notions of what constitutes an ethical commodity, for example: commodities whose production is informed, to an above-average extent, by a concern for workers’ rights or environmental sustainability, or commodities whose sale entails a donation, to a charitable cause or causes, of some part of the profits therefrom.)¹ The notion of an ethical commodity, however, refers principally to a

¹ Suffice to say, however, I would contend that a perfectly ethical commodity would be as easily attained as Society, which is to say that it is an impossibility.
certain manner of production; it will become necessary, in contrast, to speak of a commodity’s significative qualities alone. For this reason, I employ the terms ‘radically projected’ and ‘ethically projected’: I use the former term to describe commodities which expressly critique some aspect of the prevailing state of the social; the latter term names commodities which appear to constitute an ethical alternative to the norm. An ethically projected commodity is distinguished from an ethical commodity by the fact that the former is not necessarily ethically produced. (Yet, paradoxically, an ethically projected commodity that is not ethically produced may nevertheless be radical, as I shall explain below.) Conversely, ethical commodities are not necessarily presented as such, which brings us to the notion of subversive commodities. This concept was discussed in Chapter Two, in relation to Veblen’s work, but, to recap, the notion of the subversive commodity names that relatively uncommon variety of object which is ethical in some respect, but which is not overtly so.²

With regard to these distinctions, I would also like to point out: radically projected commodities deliver an explicit critique of the dominant order, while ethically projected commodities constitute an implicit critique. Let us now examine these different varieties of radical commodity in more detail.

Radical commodities as propaganda
All of the cases isolated for study here are characterised by a certain alterity: whether radically projected, or ethically projected, or both, all of these cases embody an unorthodox politics (albeit to varying degrees, of course, and in varying ways). In other words, each of these cases constitutes, in some way, a critique of the established norms and conventions of the dominant (capitalist) order. As I have mentioned, the notion of radically projected commodities may be associated with an explicit critique, delivered through commodified means, of the dominant order, whilst ethically projected commodities invariably constitute an implicit critique of the same. Incidentally, an additional distinction may be made here, namely that radical projection is for the most part associable with commodities of the cultural variety, such as the work of Michael Moore, R A T M and Naomi Klein, as well as Adbusters magazine, whilst ethical projection is largely confined to those cases which are typified by the production of more material objects, such as The Body Shop, Freitag and the Blackspot project. (It should be understood, however, that this distinction between ‘cultural’ commodities and material commodities is but a loose one, since all objects of course carry cultural significance, whilst cultural commodities, in turn, are invariably disseminated by way of such physical media as books, magazines, CDs and DVDs. Similarly provisional is the sweeping division of the cases into these two general categories.)

² Specifically, the notion of the subversive commodity was discussed in the section “The subversive commodity”, in Chapter Two.
Notwithstanding the fact that a commodity may be at once radically projected and ethically projected, it is radically projected commodities in particular—specifically, the work of Moore, Klein, RATM and Adbusters—to which we will firstly turn our attention. (Some measure of ethical projection is admittedly discernable among these cases, but it is the question of radical projection which is presently of interest.) As I have suggested, an element of criticality is not merely incidental among these radical cultural commodities; rather, it might be understood that this critical aspect defines the work of Moore, Klein, RATM and Adbusters. Yet, all of these cases differ somewhat in their foci. Moore’s books, films and television series principally comprise unsympathetic analyses of American domestic politics and of the practices of corporate America, as well as the points at which the twain invariably meet. His cause is expressly that of the average American; he is a self-appointed defender of the everyman. One of the stated objectives, for example, of Moore’s first television series, TV Nation, was to “aggressively take on the powers that be” (Moore and Glynn 1998: 8), and indeed this may be understood as an underlying tenet of his entire oeuvre. The political emphasis of RATM typically lies with the struggle of racial and political minorities in the face of the American political and legal systems, although the group’s minoritarianism is supplemented with a vehement criticism of the machinations of the media. Indeed, these themes come together in the lyrics of the song ‘Wind Below’, from the album Evil Empire (Rage Against The Machine 1996):

GE is gonna flex and try and annex the truth
NBC is gonna flex and cast their image in you
Disney bought the fantasies and piles of eyes
And ABC’s new thrill rides of trials and lies
And while the gut eaters strain to pull the mud from their mouths
They force our ears to go deaf to the screams in the south

Klein’s No Logo, meanwhile, is somewhat more universal—which is to say, global—in its scope. Whilst Klein describes it simply as “an attempt to analyze and document the forces opposing corporate rule” (Klein 2001a: xxi), the book is of course not merely a document of a burgeoning anti-corporate sentiment; Klein is unabashed in her quest therein to unearth corporate indiscretions. Likewise, she is unforgiving in her portrayal of First-World job losses and Third-World labour exploitation, among other social ills, as structural ramifications of the consumer society. In short, it is not for no reason that No Logo has been described, famously (or infamously), as “the Das Kapital of the growing anti-corporate movement” (Cohen 2000). Lastly, Adbusters’ critique is aimed squarely at the world of corporate imagery. (In fact, it might be more accurate to say that Adbusters’ critique is aimed squarely at the spectacle, since Kalle Lasn—co-founder of the Adbusters Media Foundation, editor of Adbusters magazine and CEO of the Blackspot ‘anticorporation’—is, by all accounts, a philosophical student of Guy Debord.)
Specifically, Adbusters seeks to redress the corporate domination of ‘the mental
environment’. To this end, Lasn prophesies, in his characteristically grandiloquent
style, that “[t]he only battle still worth fighting and winning, the only one that can set
us free, is The People versus The Corporate Cool Machine” (2000: xvi).

In view of these synopses, it is clear that these radically projected commodities
deliver an overt critique of the established capitalist order. Consequently, we might
understand that these commodities constitute a form of propaganda. Of course, the
term ‘propaganda’ is more than a little problematic, not merely because there is, as
Randal Marlin (2002: 15) points out, “a strong association, in English-speaking
countries, between the word ‘propaganda’ and the ideas of lying or deception”.
Unsurprisingly, we needn’t look far to find pertinent evidence of this association:
James Bowman (2005), writing for the distinctly conservative American Spectator,
employs the word’s negative connotations to full effect when he describes Michael
Moore as the “premier exponent” of “mindless propaganda”. In light of such uses of
the term in reference to radical commodities, the topic of propaganda is one that we
cannot ignore.

It is patently apparent that any discussion of ‘propaganda’ is highly subject to
one’s understanding of the term. Indeed, in his book Propaganda and the Ethics of
Persuasion, the question of the definition of ‘propaganda’ is one that Marlin tackles at
some length. The question of the definition of the term is of marked importance here,
however I am not concerned with establishing a new definition of the word, such as
might serve a certain theoretical end. Rather, more importantly, it will be seen that the
question of the definition of ‘propaganda’ will itself allow us to reframe, in somewhat
more practical terms, the concept of hegemony, as discussed previously, and will thus
also allow us to better relate the concept of hegemony to the question of radical
commodities.

I have stated that Marlin tackles the problem of the definition of ‘propaganda’ at
some length—the definition that he develops, however, is perhaps less interesting
than some of the questions that arise during the course of its development. En route to
asserting his own definition of the term, Marlin (2002: 18–21) cites a number of other
theorists’ definitions; these he classifies as negative, neutral or favourable—it is the
former of these categories which holds a particular relevance for us. Among those
definitions which Marlin deems negative is that of Bertrand Russell, who states:

> Propaganda may be defined as any attempt by means of persuasion, to enlist human
> beings in the service of one party to any dispute. It is thus distinguished … from
> instruction by its motive, which is not the dissemination of knowledge but the
> generating of some kind of party feeling. (Russell 1967: 126; also cited in Marlin 2002: 19)

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3 Marlin’s definition of negative definitions of propaganda is as follows: “[t]he characteristics of propaganda as negatively
defined are such things as lack of concern for truth, failure to respect the autonomy of those with whom one communicates,
promotion of self-serving ends, seeking control over others, etc.” (2002: 18).
Chapter 7 – Delineating the Radical Commodity

Marlin considers Russell’s definition to be negative because “the reference to ‘party feeling’ … points to a force of divisiveness in a community” (Marlin 2002: 19). Propaganda so defined, however, is in fact not necessarily negative per se; rather, we might instead understand simply that it is consistent—indeed, perfectly so—with the hegemonic form of politics. Further to this point, Marlin (2002: 15) observes that “[i]t is common to identify an opponent’s communications as propaganda, while maintaining that one’s own side is telling the truth”—this again describes a negative usage of the term, yet it is once more perfectly consistent with the notion of hegemonic articulation, as expounded by Laclau and Mouffe. In sum, whilst Marlin implicitly condemns these so-called negative definitions of ‘propaganda’, we might understand instead that it is in its tendency to ‘generate some kind of party feeling’ that the truth of propaganda in fact lies. In this vein, we might understand, after Laclau and Mouffe, not that propaganda is a ‘force of divisiveness in a community’, but rather that such divisiveness is simply an inevitable corollary of the fundamental impossibility of Society, and that it is this fundamental impossibility which is in turn manifest in the logic of propaganda.

This brings us to the question of the scope of activity that might fall within the ambit of ‘propaganda’. Vernon McKenzie (1938; also cited in Marlin 2002: 21) avers that the “real sense of propaganda is the spreading of information whether it be true or false, good or bad”—although McKenzie’s definition (which Marlin incidentally deems ‘neutral’) does not exactly acknowledge the contingency of truth and falsity, and of all values, it is at least applicable, on account of its neutrality and its inherent inclusiveness, to an era of the social wherein simulation prevails, i.e., wherein truth has become unhinged. Marlin (2002: 14) contends that propaganda is a “ubiquitous phenomenon … in today’s world”—this is an assertion with which I am wholly in agreement, since, in the absence of any final truth, all of information, communication, education, et cetera, are invariably hegemonic. That is to say, we might understand that ours is an era of the social wherein propaganda is by definition a ubiquitous phenomenon. This stands true even if the term is ‘negatively’ defined. In fact, if it is both negatively defined and understood as ubiquitous, the concept of propaganda goes a long way toward describing a milieu in which the hegemonic form of politics prevails. Consistent with this line of thought, Marlin (2002: 14) offers a useful observation:

The art of mass persuasion is embedded in contemporary societies, those of liberal or neo-conservative democracies included. Public relations methods are intertwined with all major functions of modern life. … Today, whether one deals with Exxon or Greenpeace, with multinational corporations or the coalition that disrupted the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in 1999, techniques of mass persuasion are involved. From the viewpoint of discourse analysis, there is little reason to speak of

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4 As regards the ‘identification of an opponent’s communications as propaganda’, Marlin (2002: 16) additionally observes that “[t]he Allies in both world wars characterized … opinion-forming activity by the enemy as propaganda and treated it as largely composed of lies, while their own information dissemination was treated as the truth”.

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155
‘propaganda’ on only one side of a hotly contested issue when both sides are using
techniques of persuasion to the hilt.

In short, the pervasiveness of propaganda is extreme; it is certainly not limited to
governments and other political organisations—Marlin (2002: 23) states that he
“would include the massive promotion of the McDonald’s fast-food chain in the US
and Canada under [his] definition of propaganda”. Further to this point, we should not
underestimate the breadth of institutions which might manifest the logic of
propaganda: Laswell (1927: 631) posits that the forms by way of which propaganda
might “reach the public may be spoken, written, pictorial, or musical, and the number
of stimulus carriers is infinite”—thus, if anything can be propaganda, we might
assume that everything is propaganda. Similarly, Marlin observes (coincidentally)
that “Naomi Klein has shown how many items are marketed through a ‘branding’
process, which tries to associate the product, through its logo, with a lifestyle or
worldview, so that the buyer is buying an identity along with the product” (2002:
23)—he concludes, rightly so, that “[i]t seems worthwhile to include such pervasive
forms of influence under the rubric ‘propaganda’” (2002: 23). A highly inclusive
understanding of propaganda such as this, which encompasses the institutions
of advertising and branding, as well as the world of sign-objects in its entirety, is
immensely valuable; it captures the extent of that hegemonic conflict which today
pervades the conjoined spheres of objects and signs.

It is thus clear that radical commodities constitute a form of propaganda as we
have defined it. Yet, given their patent (and defining) alterity, we might understand
that radical commodities in fact constitute a form of counter-propaganda, inasmuch
as they (differentially) promulgate a political position (i.e., a discursive position)
which differs from that of the dominant order. Indeed, this holds true not only for
radically projected commodities, but also for those which are ethically projected.
Such an appellation, however, brings into play the problems of a politics of truth. The
‘counter-’ prefix is appropriate inasmuch as radical commodities represent a rejoinder
to the dominant ideology, yet it is problematic on account of the fact that it carries
with it a presumption of truth: if there is ‘a strong association between the word
‘propaganda’ and the ideas of lying or deception’, we might assume that there is,
conversely, a potential association between the notion of ‘counter-propaganda’ and
that of truth. David Edelstein (cited in Buruma 2004) writes that Michael Moore’s
Fahrenheit 9/11 “is not a documentary for the ages, it is an act of counter-propaganda
that has a boorish, bullying force”. Although Edelstein dubs Moore’s film ‘counter-
propaganda’, and not simply ‘propaganda’, he does ascribe to it, in spite of the
positive connotations of the ‘counter-’ prefix, those negative qualities that might
typically be associated with propaganda proper, by way of his description of it as
‘boorish’ and ‘bullying’. He concludes, however, that the film “is, all in all, a
legitimate abuse of power”—this description implies that Moore’s political position is
more virtuous than is that of the US government, which his film lambastes. It is
precisely this connotation of legitimacy which complicates the notion of ‘counter-propaganda’, since neither propaganda nor counter-propaganda (if we permit the latter idea) is proximate to Truth. In sum, if we are to permit the term at all, it must be understood that counter-propaganda is in fact no less propagandistic, according to our definition, than is propaganda proper—the difference resides merely with the marginal position from which the former issues.

On floating signifieds, or: ethically projected commodities and the radicalism of difference

As has been stated, the means by which an ethically projected commodity constitutes a critique of the system is markedly different from those which characterise a radically projected commodity; an ethically projected commodity constitutes an implicit critique of other commodities, and thus of the commodity-form itself.

This, however, has not been contemplated in detail. We might understand that the radicalism of ethically projected commodities in fact issues precisely from the difference between sign-objects. That is to say, this implicit critique is nothing other than a political consequence of the differential character of signification. Recall Saussure’s observations that ‘within the same language, all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally’, and that ‘signs function not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position’. Likewise, ethically projected commodities serve to shift the value (the sign-value) of those commodities which surround them—furthermore, this is true regardless of whether or not their projected politics is carried through into practice. Take, for example, the case of The Body Shop: the introduction into the market of an ethically projected cosmetic casts a shadow of doubt upon the ethicality of its competitors, whose production practices might previously have gone unquestioned.

Of course, no commodity is likely scrutinised more closely than that which is ethically projected, and rightly so, but, in this one paradoxical sense, it ultimately matters little whether or not an ethically projected commodity in fact makes good on its claims, for it is the meme of ethical production alone which here constitutes the seed of change. In other words, even if the reality of an ethically projected commodity does not live up to its image, it nevertheless introduces into the system the image of an ideal type, a benchmark against which all others may be measured—this is nothing other than a floating signified awaiting fit representation. We might also understand this as the radicalism of difference. (It should be reiterated, however, that a perfectly ethical production is of course an impossibility). The case of The Body Shop begs

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5 Yet nor, for that matter, is any other variety of articulation proximate to Truth, since it is not the case that propaganda—or counter-propaganda—misrepresents any Truth, but rather that there is ultimately nothing to misrepresent, since all truths are necessarily contingent. If fact, in keeping with what has been said about the impossibility of the suture of the social, and about the transferential illusion that is the essence of ideology, it should be stated that it is not propaganda but rather the very notion of Truth which is misrepresentative.

6 For this reason, it may be better to speak not of ‘counter-propaganda’, but of ‘(counter-)propaganda’—a parenthetical prefix alludes to the political marginality of our object, but is downplayed, such that we might understand that what we are speaking of is in fact nothing less than propaganda. This slight theoretical distinction, however, does not justify the terminological complexity—or terminological pomposity— which ensues.
discussion here. The practices of The Body Shop have been called into question on numerous occasions. Indeed, Jon Entine, one of The Body Shop’s most outspoken critics, has demonstrated the many and various ways in which the company does not live up to its promises. Entine (2003) questions the naturalness of The Body Shop’s products and the integrity of its quality control standards, points out not only flaws but gross misrepresentations as regards the company’s fair trade schemes, charitable contributions and ‘against animal testing’ stance, and even offers compelling evidence which debunks the very myth of The Body Shop’s origins. From one point of view (which is indeed relevant and legitimate), the inconsistencies mentioned by Entine are cause for grave concern. And yet, whilst such exposés as Entine’s are undoubtedly important, particularly if they have some basis in truth, it is nevertheless the case that, from our current perspective, it ultimately matters little whether or not The Body Shop’s claims are reflected in the company’s practices. To reiterate, as regards the question of its alterity at the level of signification, the question of The Body Shop’s operational integrity is null, since, from this point of view, the meme of ethical production alone is of seditious consequence. For example, regarding the animal testing issue, Entine (2003: 16) has stated that “many animal rights activists and cosmetic industry experts believe Roddick has exploited the controversy and stirred hysteria on a complicated issue for commercial gain”—this might certainly be the case, but The Body Shop’s engagement with the issue has also undoubtedly played a significant part in bringing the problem of animal testing to widespread public attention.

**The manifest paradox**

I posited above that radical commodities, in general, might be understood as propagandistic. This, however, is no great revelation. The members of Rage Against The Machine, for example, had themselves already reached the conclusion that they were actively participating in the institution of propaganda: Tom Morello once claimed that RATM used “the mechanism of the record label to spread revolutionary propaganda” (quoted in Jenkins 1996). Moreover, the liner notes of RATM’s albums list an address to which fans may write, for ‘propaganda and merchandise’. Yet, the band’s music itself is both propaganda and merchandise. That single statement from RATM’s liner notes thus brings to the fore a much larger issue: if the band’s propaganda is of the revolutionary variety, the conflation of propaganda and merchandise would appear to be more than a little contradictory—and thus perfectly consistent with the very concept of a ‘radical commodity’, which itself is of course paradoxical to the core. (And indeed it is this paradox with which this dissertation, in its entirety, is principally concerned.) RATM’s lead vocalist, Zack de la Rocha (cited in Raphael 1996), once stated that he believed that “Rage, to an extent, has become an alternative media for young people—or people who the corporately-owned media has a vested interest in alienating, in ensuring that they don’t become politically active”. One must wonder, however, whether de la Rocha, when describing his band as an
alternative to the ‘corporately-owned media’, suffered from a moment of mental abstraction, i.e., whether he briefly failed to recall that RATM was in fact signed to Epic Records, an imprint of the multinational Sony Music. As Jon Pareles (1996) points out, “Zack de la Rocha’s raps declare that he’s a revolutionary as his albums rack up profits for a multinational corporation”. In short, the fundamental paradox of the radical commodity is perhaps nowhere more acutely manifest than it is in the contradiction between the radical (and frequently anti-corporate) messages promulgated by the work of Michael Moore, Naomi Klein and RATM, and the fact that multinational corporations are wholly responsible for the publication and dissemination of that work. (Adbusters is less relevant here, because it is an independent organisation.)

This contradiction, in turn, is perhaps most readily discernable, at least as regards RATM and Michael Moore, in the occasional censorship that they have experienced as a result of conflicts between their ‘message’ and corporate interests. In what was perhaps the most infamous instance of censorship to which RATM were subject during their career, the band was evicted from NBC’s studios, having completed only half of their scheduled performance on Saturday Night Live. On the night in question, the show was being hosted by billionaire and ex-Republican presidential candidate Steve Forbes; according to the group’s guitarist, Tom Morello, “RATM wanted to stand in sharp juxtaposition to a billionaire telling jokes and promoting his flat tax … by making our own statement” (Morello, cited in Moore 1996a). That statement involved two American flags, hung upside-down from their amplifiers. The inverted flags, according to Morello, represented the group’s “contention that American democracy is inverted when what passes for democracy is an electoral choice between two representatives of the privileged class. America’s freedom of expression is inverted when you’re free to say anything you want to say until it upsets a corporate sponsor” (Morello, cited in Moore 1996a). Aply enough, it seems that the inverted flags must indeed have upset a corporate sponsor, because they were torn down by the network’s stagehands, seconds before RATM began their first song. Following the completion of that song, the band members, who had been warned earlier against hanging the flags, were promptly ejected from the building, in spite of the fact that they had been scheduled to play another. Morello summed it up: “SNL censored Rage, period” (Morello, cited in Moore 1996a).

Whilst RATM were censored by NBC/Saturday Night Live, and were targeted on numerous occasions throughout their career by various right-wing organisations, the police, and conservative broadcasters and politicians who sought their censorship (mostly unsuccessfully), none of the group members ever indicated that their work had been, on any occasion, subject to expurgation at the hands of their record label. Michael Moore’s work, on the other hand, has repeatedly been subject to censorship by the very corporations that broadcast, publish and distribute it (and who would thus, of course, stand to profit from it). In one example, which again involves NBC, the network demanded that the ending of a segment from Moore’s television series TV
Nation be changed, or else it would not go to air. The segment, entitled ‘Health Care Olympics’, was a comparative assessment of the American, Canadian and Cuban health care systems, based on the experiences of and the expenses ultimately faced by a similarly injured patient in each country. Moore and Glynn recount the situation:

As you know, TV Nation was a nonfiction, documentary show. While we used humor and created situations to illustrate our point of view, everything seen on the show was recorded as it actually happened. Except here. For the first and only time on TV Nation, NBC censors made us change the ending of a segment. The truth is, by applying the standards of the competition fairly to each country, Cuba won. It provided the best care in the fastest time and for absolutely no fee to the patient. The censor told us that politically there was no way we could show Cuba winning on primetime television. We were told to make Canada the winner. We argued right up to show time that this was both dishonest and also pretty silly. … We lost, and the piece aired with Canada as the winner. It makes you wonder what else is ‘changed,’ on TV if something this insignificant cannot even make it on the air in its original form. (1998: 162)

Furthermore, although Moore and his team were forced to alter the ending of ‘Health Care Olympics’, five other TV Nation segments were censored in their entirety (see ‘The Censored TV Nation’, in Moore and Glynn 1998: 191–199); these included “a scary look at the subculture within the anti-abortion movement that believes it is acceptable to threaten doctors who perform abortions” (Moore and Glynn 1998: 192), a re-enactment of the LA riots, and segments on the Savings and Loan scandal, small condoms, and ‘gay bashing’ in Kansas.

As regards its censorship, however, TV Nation is not unique among Moore’s work. In another example, which is, notably, merely one other among many, Moore’s third book, Stupid White Men … and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation! (2002), was suppressed (although the censorship was only temporary in this case):

[Stupid White Men] was scheduled to be published, in a classic example of Moore’s accidental timing, on September 10, 2001. By September 12, his publisher, HarperCollins, had decided to hold the book back a few months, the thinking being that this was not the time for a book castigating the nation’s environmental destructiveness, racism and general idiocy. A few months passed and Moore rang to find out what was happening. He says the publishers demanded a rewrite, especially of the chapter called ‘Kill Whitey’ and of his criticism of Bush…. The publisher also wanted Moore to put up $US100,000 of his own money to re-publish if he ever wanted to see it on the shelves. He tried, without success, to negotiate. The book was released in the end only because news of its suppression had spread on the internet and become something of a literary scandal. (Bunbury 2002)

It was not merely by way of the restraint of its publication, however, that HarperCollins attempted to suppress the book:

There were no publicity tours, no chat-show appearances, no advance copies dispatched to reviewers. The idea was that the book would quietly disappear, but something else happened. Stupid White Men … and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of
Chapter 7 – Delineating the Radical Commodity

*the Nation* shot to the top of *The New York Times* best-seller list and stayed there, despite the fact that the liberal newspaper hasn’t reviewed it. In Britain, it topped the best-seller list before it was released, thanks to internet sales. And in Australia it remained in the best-seller list for three months. (Bunbury 2002)

The networks and publishers obviously have bottom lines to consider, and accordingly would not wish to offend advertisers or readers/viewers, but it may nevertheless be understood that all of these examples—RATM on *SNL*, and Moore’s *TV Nation* and *Stupid White Men*—demonstrate an *ideological* censorship at work. Moore and Glynn sum this up perfectly when they state that they “learned that the reasons for television censorship are not just sex and violence and language. Sometimes, *ideas* are just too dangerous to air” (1998: 199). Although their comment refers specifically to television, their conclusion might be readily applied to any corporatised medium.

Whilst censorship is undeniably a matter of great consequence, we might understand that this is ultimately *not* the most significant concern to arise from the contradiction between the politically oppositional message of these radical cultural commodities and the fact that they are published by typically conservative multinational corporations. Indeed, potentially much more problematic is the apparent hypocrisy of disseminating a radical message through corporate channels. The irony, for example, of the fact that Klein’s *No Logo* is published in the UK (and other countries) by *Flamingo*—an imprint of the Murdoch-owned HarperCollins, which is “a major corporation if ever there was one” (Viner 2000)—has not escaped critics. Klein, however, would seek to assuage this conflict by way of a certain reflexivity, which incidentally constitutes a curious inversion of the censoring effect that might otherwise be expected to result from her relationship with HarperCollins:

> What I said when I signed with HarperCollins was that I was going to go out of my way to write about Murdoch, more than I would have done otherwise. I did, and they didn’t touch it. (Klein, quoted in Viner 2000)

(Surprisingly, in spite of the fact that Michael Moore’s books are also published by HarperCollins, he has largely escaped criticism on these grounds. This is perhaps because he is apparently so readily assailable in other regards, such as, for example, his allegedly licentious reporting of facts.) The matter of their corporate affiliation, however, is one with which the members of RATM were acutely plagued throughout their career. In a review of one RATM concert, for example, Ira Band points out “the irony of this most vitriolic of anti-establishment bands”: “suddenly possessed of a chart-topping, multi-million-selling album—recording for, and receiving royalty cheques from one of the world’s largest multi-national corporations … rage all you want, guys. But in some small way, you’re part of the machine” (Band 1996). As one

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7 Indeed, according to Harrison (2000), Klein herself “acknowledges the irony of an anti-corporate book being published by Flamingo, an imprint of HarperCollins—itself part of a multinational”. 

161
would hope, however, this irony does not go unnoticed by the practitioners themselves:

Ultimately, although a lot of people criticised us for being in bed with our enemies, I disagree. I think that it’s a mutually exploitative situation. The kind of information that people can get as a result of using Sony is much more important than what some people would consider an endorsement. (de la Rocha, cited in Raphael 1996)

Those ‘people’ (who ‘get information’) to whom de la Rocha is referring are of course his band’s audience; the ‘information’ that they stand to ‘get’ is of course that information of the seditious variety which his band disseminates—de la Rocha’s premise is namely that the enormous reach which the band is afforded by their association with Sony is more beneficial than is the corporate affiliation detrimental. We are thus approaching the heart of the corporate/anti-corporate question, and indeed of the question of radical commodities itself: this is nothing other than a question of tactics. As was said earlier, radical commodities may be understood as artefacts of a tactical production (in the de Certeauian sense of ‘tactic’). Specifically, after Fiske, we might understand that the members of RATM excorporated the resources and the global distribution channels of Sony Music in pursuit of their own political ends. Indeed, this is precisely how the band members themselves portrayed the situation. In an interview by Cheryl Botchick (1999), Morello himself avows, in so many words, that the band’s decision to sign with a multinational label was a ‘tactical’ one:

*It seems like no matter what activist work the band does, your critics keep bemoaning, “If Rage is so anti-establishment, then why are they on a Sony label?” What is the band’s official response to that?*

Oh, I’ve had years of forging that response! (laughs) First of all, that question has never once come to the band from anyone who is involved in political activism. [It] only comes … from smug rock journalists and it only comes from, for the most part, your middle-class people who may have some sort of indie rock elitist credentials, but beyond that have done jack shit in the world of political activism. Leonard Peltier doesn’t care what label we’re on. We’ve been able to introduce his case to an entirely new generation of young people, which increases the pressure, through letter-writing and emails and what have you, on President Clinton to try to get an order of clemency. The Anti-Nazi League in Europe doesn’t care what label we’re on, because when it comes time to hold a benefit show, we draw enough people to help put bodies in the streets the next day to throw bricks at fascists. They don’t care. At all. It’s tactical as much as anything else. You have two choices when you’re a band with political ideals: you either put your head in the sand and you sell 45s out of the back of a truck and you’re very proud of yourself for how pure you are, or you engage the world and you do your best to make strategies to effect real change. First of all, there’s very little precedent for what we’re doing. There’s not a map for revolutionary rock bands on major labels who sell nine million records. … There’s no precedent for it, so we’re figuring out elements of it on our own. But when that criticism comes from people who
just don’t know anything about what it’s like to try to get even a quarter of an inch on page 52 of the paper about their cause or about their struggle, and Rage Against The Machine can put it on the front page or can fill the Continental Airlines Arena [in New Jersey], it just shows a shocking lack of perspective. And you also have to ask yourself, too, that if you’re an author or something, a person who’s writing about political things that matter to you and anti-establishment issues, do you not want your books sold in places people buy their books? Do you wanna write each book out by hand?

Like a monk.

Right! (laughs) Like a monk! And just be very pure about it. Well, then God bless you and best of luck to you in your work, but we’ve chosen another path, and haven’t lost a night’s sleep over it.

To be sure, the scope of influence that RATM have been afforded as a result of their association with Sony cannot be denied. Similarly, the global phenomenon that was *No Logo*—’global’, that is, at least inasmuch as it proliferated throughout the Western world—would almost certainly never have eventuated had Klein self-published her book. And, whilst Moore’s early films were extensively screened throughout the network of ‘art house’ cinemas, it is only by virtue of deals with the largest global media conglomerates that his has become a household name on an international scale, and that his political commentary has reached so many.

**Conclusion**

We now have a somewhat clearer picture of the phenomenon of radical commodities. We have seen, for example: the ways in which the fundamental contradiction of radical commodities comes to the surface in such forms as censorship; the motives which underlie participation in the commodity system as a means of political action, and; the principal ways in which a radical politics might be expressed through commodity-objects—these are namely *explicit* critique, in the case of radically projected commodities, and *implicit* critique, in the case of ethically projected commodities. A comprehensive picture of radical commodities, however, should incorporate a consideration of the relationship between such objects and the system of branding, and so it is this rather momentous topic to which we shall turn our attention in the coming chapter.

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8 On a similar note: Steve Burgess, in an article which is reproduced in Chapter Nine, remarks that “[y]ou can hardly blame [Naomi Klein] for getting her book published—no sense being an anti-corporate-branding tree falling in a lonely forest” (Burgess 2001).
8. Revolution™: Radical Commodities and Branding

We know that the concept of a radical commodity is itself inherently contradictory; these notionally insurgent objects reproduce, in apparent spite of themselves, the commodity-form in its troublesome entirety. However, it is not merely the commodity mode of exchange that these objects perpetuate; so too do they participate in and thus reproduce, sometimes less perceptibly, a number of other taken-for-granted institutions of the consumer society, of which the most significant today must be the institution of branding.

This perpetuation of the institution of branding by radical commodities is certainly discernable in the case of The Body Shop. Recall our discussion, in the previous chapter, of the ‘radicalism of difference’: it is precisely the institution of branding that is leveraged to radical effect by way of The Body Shop’s ethically projected commodities. That is to say, the radical difference of The Body Shop’s products is not effected on an object-by-object basis; rather, notwithstanding the fact that its brand is embodied in each of its products, it is The Body Shop’s identity as a whole—its brand—which is contrasted with those of its competitors, and with the status quo. It is, in other words, the sum of those elements which comprise The Body Shop’s identity—its retail environment replete with provocative posters and leaflets, its product mix, including apparently natural products and fair-trade goods, and, not least of all, its campaigning reputation (as well as that of Anita Roddick herself)—that contributes to the estimation, in the mind of the consumer, that the act of purchasing a Body Shop product is a political act.

Of course, the notion of a radical brand, like that of the radical commodity itself, strikes one as rather contradictory. I would like to argue, however, that there are in fact compelling grounds for an altogether different understanding of the situation. Specifically, I would like to argue that the institution of branding is wholly congruent with radical commodities—or, in fact, that the former is constitutive of the possibility of the latter.

A (very) brief history of branding

We have observed, time and again, that objects function as signs. The meaning that a single object carries, however, rarely issues today from the qualities of that object alone. That is to say, the differential character of signification itself notwithstanding, an object’s meaning is today supplemented or indeed determined by “the super-sign that is the brand name” (Baudrillard 1998: 148). Given the way in which it acts upon the system of objects, the system of brands might be likened to that of myth as understood by Barthes, namely as a ‘second-order semiological system’.

In view of the fact that almost no commodity today goes unbranded, it would be naïve to imagine that any radically motivated commodity production could avoid some form of participation in this institution, even though non-participation might, in
the case of radical commodities, be desirable. “Today”, as Wally Olins observes, “branding is ubiquitous” (2003: 15). Although it is perhaps less obvious with regard to some of these cases than others, Rage Against The Machine, Michael Moore, Naomi Klein, Adbusters, Freitag, Edun and The Body Shop are all brands; they are more than the sum of their products, and thus they recursively supplement the meanings of those products.\(^1\) For this reason, whilst we have previously touched upon the question of brands—which we will do in Chapter Two—in relation to Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption—it is now necessary to consider the phenomenon of branding in a little more detail.

Per Mollerup (1997) locates the earliest derivations of branding in heraldic marks and imagery; a subsequent antecedent is found in the makers’ marks used to demarcate the origins of earthenware and metalwork, particularly silver (Mollerup 1997; Lury 2004). Consistent with such an analysis, Chevalier and Mazzalovo posit that, “[f]rom the earliest identifying signs used by potters in ancient times to our modern logos, an unbroken line of parentage extends through the history of exchange between human beings” (2004: 8). Branding as we know it today, however, has its most explicit roots in early industrial capitalism—to be precise, these roots lie, according to Olins (2003: 48–51), with the patent medicine industry in the US (it is this industry in which the Coca-Cola brand famously began). The ‘branding’ of patent medicine is particularly noteworthy, since it did not merely function as an indicator of origin, but was also intimately linked with claims which extolled—or (more frequently) exceeded—the benefits of the product. As Olins recounts, this practice was soon adopted in other areas:

The brands created by patent medicine people, which they in turn had lifted from the age-old principles of applying marks of origin to products, were copied by companies making other products which went into the home. … The great consumer goods businesses of the Victorian period—Rowntree, Cadbury and Lever in Britain, Nestlé in Switzerland, Henkel and Liebig in Germany, Procter & Gamble, Heinz and Kellogg’s in the US—took branding out of the semi-reputable world of the medicine chest into the kitchen. … The brands these companies created lived largely through promotion. The genius lay not so much in inventing the product, or even in manufacturing and distributing it, but in communicating a simple, single, dramatic, frequently exaggerated and sometimes mendacious statement about it again and again. (Olins 2003: 51–52)

We therefore see, in Olins’s account of the situation in the late 19th century, the beginnings of that which is perhaps the defining function of branding today, namely differentiation. Specifically, branding comprises a calculated differentiation in pursuit of commercial ends. This is further evident in Olins’s relation of the story of William Hesketh Lever (who created Sunlight soap, and whose company survives to this day, having become, through mergers, a large part of the multinational Unilever): “[i]n his

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\(^1\) Celia Lury observes that “[o]n the one hand, branded products are themselves discrete; on the other, in so far as they are branded, they have a kind of unity in their relation to one another. The brand is thus a unity that is more than the sum of its parts (or products)” (2004: 76).
job selling soap, butter and other perishable commodities to retail grocers all over the north of England, he saw the standards of living of ordinary people rising fast and he felt that he could both *anticipate and create demand through packaging, branding and advertising*” (2003: 52, my emphasis).

It might therefore be understood that branding is, in essence, nothing other than an extension of the commodity-form, and indeed we are beginning to see the numerous ways in which branding mirrors the structural tendencies of the commodity-form. Branding is a means by which industrially produced commodities can, to commercial advantage, be supplemented with industrially mediated claims about those commodities. We should recognise, however, that, whilst branding does introduce differentiation into previously undifferentiated market sectors in pursuit of profit, this differentiation is not necessarily devoid of merit. On this note, let us return to the story of Lever. From basic foodstuffs, Lever moved into soap, which at the time was “available only in greyish bars of inconsistent quality” (Olins 2003: 53). In the early days of Sunlight, “Lever outsourced production and focused on distributing and marketing. After a little experimentation—some of the outsourcing was poor, the soap changed colour, went rancid and stank—Lever eventually got product quality right” (Olins 2003: 53). Thus, although soap was initially “a totally undifferentiated commodity ripe for development” (Olins 2003: 53), which is to say that Lever’s decision to move into the sector would certainly have been commercially motivated, the introduction of (branded) competition into the soap sector also afforded consumers access to a product of a consistently decent quality (albeit at a price, of course). In sum, branding does, to its credit, allow consumers to differentiate between products on grounds of product quality (and today according to other criteria also, as will be seen). This has important implications, which we will come back to.

In the intervening years, that is, between the time of the introduction onto the market of Lever’s first soaps and the present day, branding has become an immensely more significant phenomenon, not only in commercial terms but also in cultural terms. It has become both more widespread and more entrenched. This might be attributed, to a significant degree, to the advanced development of industrial production techniques:

> These days because of the availability of the best technology to everyone, all the top competitors in any given sector are very good. In fact in order to get into the race you have to be as good as the best of the competition. This means that in most but not quite all businesses, technical skills alone don’t secure victory any more. (Olins 2003: 8)

That is to say, in the late 19th century, a *trademark* served principally as an indicator of origin and thus as a guarantee of a product’s quality: a logo on a package embodied a company’s reputation and distinguished that company’s products not only from those of competing brands but also, more importantly, from generic, unbranded or undifferentiated goods whose quality could not be assured. Today, however, a base level of product quality is effectively assured (at least, it is in First-World
countries/markets), not only by improved production techniques and technologies, but also by corresponding legislation. In other words, as Celia Lury observes,

the role of the trade mark as a guarantor of (minimum) quality or standards is arguably less crucial to a wide range of goods and services now than it was in the past. One impetus for early trade mark legislation was to enable the consumer to choose between products of a certain quality that carried a well-known mark and others of lesser or unknown quality. However, consumer legislation has ensured that in many countries the public can expect a certain minimum quality for a wide range of goods and services, whether a mark attaches to them or not. (2004: 109)

The advancement in the technologies and systems of production, however, has resulted in a state of affairs wherein not only has quality become a less significant factor in product differentiation, but so too has function: “product differentiation in terms of function is less and less often able to sustain competitive advantage (because it can be imitated so quickly)” (Lury 2004: 28). Olins makes a similar observation: “[i]nnovation is vital, but nowadays almost anything can be copied—usually fast” (2003: 8). The net effect of this is an ascendancy of the economic importance of the sign as compared to the qualities of the object proper. Where the earliest trademarks served to impart a company’s reputation upon its products, it is increasingly the case today that, conversely, products act as advertisements for a brand. As Lury observes, the brand “is an abstraction that is made concrete in specific products and services” (2004: 9). Thus, it might be said that we are today not buying products because of the reputations of the companies that produce them, but that we are instead buying into those (abstract) reputations by way of the (concrete) products. In sum, the contemporary object of consumption is less and less frequently the product itself, and ever more frequently the brand. This, however, is not to say that the quality and the functionality of the product is now of no importance, but rather that the balance of power, so to speak, between an object’s use-value (its material characteristics, with specific regard to product quality and function) and its sign-value (which, I must emphasise, refers not to the sign-value of the discrete object alone, for this sign-value is supplemented or indeed determined by ‘the super-sign that is the brand name’) has shifted; to reiterate, we are witnessing an ascendancy of the latter over the former, that is, an ascendancy of sign-value over use-value. This change in emphasis, which we might understand as a defining characteristic of the consumer society, is perhaps best illustrated by Phil Knight’s reflections on what was a fundamental change in direction for Nike, that company of which he is CEO:

For years, we thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product. But now we understand that the most important thing we do is market the product. We’ve come around to saying that Nike is a marketing company, and the product is our most important marketing tool. What I mean is that marketing knits the whole organization together. The design elements and functional characteristics of the product itself are just part of
Branding as an extension of the commodity-form

The preceding discussion of the evolution of branding serves to reiterate and also, at times, expand upon much of what was said in earlier chapters with regard to the consumption-centric variety of capitalism that prevails in ‘advanced’ societies today. As regards the question of radical commodities, however, the matter of branding is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the observation that the economic (and social) consequence of marketing has overtaken that of the product harks back to our discussion, in Chapter Three, of Baudrillard’s notions of models and series, of personalisation, and of ‘inessential’ differences. Accordingly, branding is by no means politically neutral—it serves an ideological function—and yet this is a system in which radical commodities invariably participate, and which they thus perpetuate. Yet, secondly, because of this very partiality, branding also constitutes an object of critique for both Naomi Klein and Adbusters, and indeed explicitly so. The question of the political and structural implications of branding, therefore, which the preceding discussion has prefaced, is not only of analytic significance as regards the phenomenon of radical commodities as a whole, but is also directly relevant to two of the cases under scrutiny here. Is branding to be understood as a further encroachment of the commodity-form upon the realm of the subject, or is it to be extolled as a new and indeterminate ‘space’ within the sphere of exchange which might permit the expression of a radical politics? These are the questions which we must now begin to tackle.

In Chapter Two, we briefly discussed branding in relation to Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption, which is understood as thoroughly competitive (i.e., emulative) in nature. Veblen’s analysis, however, first published in 1899, would appear to be a little out-of-date: the system of branding, like consumption as a whole, is purported to be driven today not by competition but rather by a quest, on the part of individual consumers, for self-fulfilment. In this vein, Lury remarks: “[i]nstead of a desire to keep up with the Joneses, consumers are believed to be more concerned with finding meaning in their lives” (2004: 38). Baudrillard describes this as “a ‘philosophy’ of personal accomplishment” (1996: 184); he observes that instead of vying for possession of things, individuals seek self-fulfilment, independently of one another, through what they consume. The leitmotiv of discriminative competition has been replaced by that of personalization for all. … The thesis is simple: (1) the consumer society (objects, products, advertising) offers the individual the possibility, for the first time in history, of total liberation and self-realization; (2) transcending consumption pure and simple in the direction of individual and collective self-expression, the system of consumption constitutes a true language, a new culture. The ‘nihilism’ of consumption is thus effectively countered by a ‘new humanism’ of consumption. (1996: 184)
Of course, this world of (branded) objects should not be too readily understood as an unbounded and altogether virtuous font of possibilities for self-fulfilment: recall Baudrillard’s observation, cited in Chapter Three, that ‘personalization’, far from being a mere advertising ploy, is actually a basic ideological concept of a society which ‘personalizes’ objects and beliefs solely in order to integrate persons more effectively. As Horkheimer and Adorno remark, “[s]omething is provided for all so that none may escape” (1973: 123). In other words, the quest for the ‘realisation’ of our individual selves through the consumption of material provided to us for that express purpose necessarily subjects us to and integrates us into the very system which provides that material. Further to this, Veblen’s notion of emulation through conspicuous consumption is not so obsolete as some would have us believe. Whilst it is true that pecuniary emulation may be a less significant factor in today’s consumption practices, it has been replaced (in those sectors in which it might actually be understood to be in decline) not by a great plurality of individuals’ quests for self-fulfilment, but rather by what we might call a leitmotiv of cultural emulation in the guise of the promise of self-fulfilment. This state of affairs is in fact characterised not by a quest for self-realisation, but rather by a quest for coolness, which is categorically exclusivist. As Naomi Klein remarks, “in the eighties you had to be relatively rich to get noticed by marketers. In the nineties, you have only to be cool” (2001a: 73).

Whilst the fundamental volte-face in Nike’s corporate outlook described by Phil Knight, which renders product design answerable to marketing strategy, is perfectly consistent with the tendency, observed by Baudrillard, toward personalisation through ‘inessential’ differences between products, Nike is also noteworthy on account of the fact that, given its corporate strategy, it constitutes an archetypal example of the rise of ‘cool’ in contemporary capitalism. That is to say, we might conclude, as does Klein, that these two phenomena—the relative supersession of the product by the brand on the one hand, and the explosion of the commercial and social significance of cultural emulation (i.e., the quest for cultural cachet, or coolness) on the other—are symbiotically related: “[c]ool, alternative, young, hip—whatever you want to call it—was the perfect identity for product-driven companies looking to become transcendent image-based brands” (Klein 2001a: 68). Nike (among other brands, of course) therefore capitalises upon but also perpetuates, or rather encourages, the logic of cultural emulation in consumption, specifically by way of its own quest to be cool.

Marketing that follows such a strategy, however, has to find its direction and content somewhere, and this ‘somewhere’ frequently lies with those persons (consumers) to whom a brand must cater if it is to be profitable. Further, if, as we

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1 Horkheimer and Adorno’s observation here was originally made in reference to the ‘culture industry’, however it is equally applicable to the system of branding, since it might be understood that the latter is in many ways an advanced version of the former, or perhaps that the latter has in fact enveloped the former.

2 Recall also Baudrillard’s remark that ‘the very concept of the individual is the product of the general system of exchange’—as was stated earlier, the individual who is offered fulfilment through the system of consumption is nothing but a product of the same.
have seen, the economic significance of products proper has been overshadowed by that of brand identity, it is not a demand for material things but rather a partiality to certain ideas and images that brands must identify amongst their audiences, and herein lies the object of one of the key criticisms delivered by Naomi Klein in *No Logo*, namely that brands ‘co-opt’ our culture, repackage it, and sell it back to us—or, alternately, that brands co-opt one group’s culture, repackage it, and sell it to a different group (often inflaming, or at least capitalising upon, cultural and social differences and antagonisms in the process). As regards the latter scenario, and the Tommy Hilfiger brand in particular, Klein posits that, “[l]ike so much of cool hunting, Hilfiger’s marketing journey feeds off the alienation at the heart of America’s race relations: selling white youth on their fetishization of black style, and black youth on their fetishization of white wealth” (2001a: 76).

Even if the implications of the situation are rarely reflected upon, it is effectively common knowledge today that the world of branded goods does not simply function as a platform for a conspicuous one-upmanship on pecuniary grounds, but rather that it also serves as a vehicle for the expression of almost all aspects of our identities (as consumers). Olins (2003: 14) observes that “[b]randing these days is largely about involvement and association; the outward and visible demonstration of private and personal affiliation. Branding enables us to define ourselves in terms of a shorthand that is immediately comprehensible to the world around us”. Similarly, Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004: 26) posit that “[t]he three stripes on running shoes, the polo player embroidered on a shirt, the ‘swoosh’ on the cap or the Kelly bag—not to mention the car someone drives or the restaurants he or she goes to—often say more about the personality of the individual who wears them than his or her curriculum vitae”. More worrying, however, is the idea that the world of branded goods might not merely play a role in the expression of consumers’ identities, but that it might be central also to the construction thereof. This notion is implicit in Olins’s above comment—consider its phrasing: we (namely the plural first person subject of Olins’s remark) do not merely communicate our identities through the shorthand that is branding; rather, we define ourselves in terms of it. To return to the topic of youth, Klein contends that the youth of the nineties were the first generation whose culture had been ‘sold out’ from the outset, i.e., “for whom generational identity had largely been a pre-packaged good and for whom the search for self had always been shaped by marketing hype, whether or not they believed it or defined themselves against it” (2001a: 66). “This”, she continues, “is a side effect of

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4 At this point, we might also briefly note that ‘youth’ is a highly significant term in today’s branded world: whilst the youth market itself is of course the target of much marketing, Youth is the theme—or the promise—that prevails amongst much of the marketing that is directed at everyone else. Klein posits that “[t]heir ‘aspirational age,’ as they say in marketing studies, is about seventeen” (2001a: 70)—indeed, in view of the fact that companies themselves are fervently seeking cultural cachet, we should understand that Klein’s observation applies to brands and consumers both.

5 Compare Olins’s description of branding as a ‘shorthand that is immediately comprehensible to the world around us’ with Veblen’s understanding, cited in Chapter Two, of conspicuous consumption as a ‘signature of one’s pecuniary strength’ that is ‘written in characters which he who runs may read’.
brand expansion that is far more difficult to track and quantify than the branding of
culture and city spaces. This loss of space happens inside the individual; it is a
colonization not of physical space but of mental space”. (2001a: 66). This harks back
to what has been said about the radicalism of the commodity-form: that notion of a
‘colonisation of mental space’ which Klein evokes on the part of branding is perfectly
consistent with Lukács’s observation that the commodity relation ’stamps its imprint
upon the whole consciousness of man’.

We ought to also briefly acknowledge that although the system of branding
seemingly permits, at an abstract level, a genuine diversity within the sphere of
capitalism, it also serves to perpetuate, at more practical level, specifically by way of
juridical intervention, a certain imbalance of power. Lury (2004: 7) observes that “the
brand is a frame that organises the two-way exchange of information between the
inner and outer environments of the market in time, informing how consumers relate
to producers and how producers relate to consumers”, however, “although these
exchanges are intensive, dynamic and two-way, they are not direct, symmetrical or
reversible”. Of particular interest here is not only the fact that the brand constitutes an
asymmetrical channel of communication between producer and consumer, but also
that the legal system is complicit in maintaining this asymmetry: Lury remarks that
“the law is one of the most significant actors in the organisation of the asymmetry of
the relations between producers and consumers, operating so as to consolidate and
legitimate the use of the brand as an object or mode of capital accumulation” (2004:
98–99). More significantly, she posits that trademark law “makes it possible for trade
mark owners to establish and lay claim to property rights in new forms of object-ivity
[sic]” (2004: 14). What Lury describes here is nothing other than that ‘colonisation of
mental space’ recognised by Klein, a colonisation in which—it is now
apparent—trademark law is wholly complicit, or to which it is in fact crucial. Yet,
whilst it is this intangible, ‘mental’ space which is the object of said property rights (a
development which is, in itself, worrying enough), we must also recognise—thus
returning to the original question of power relations—that the ability to lay claim to
pieces of such mental space is consistent with that delimitation of place which
characterises the de Certeauian strategy. (Recall de Certeau’s definition of strategy as
‘the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as
soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific
institution) can be isolated’, but also that the notion of strategy ‘postulates a place that
can be delimited as [that subject’s] own and serve as the base from which relations
with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies,
the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be
managed’.) In sum, in view of the de Certeauian conception of strategy, we must
recognise that the ‘colonisation of mental space’ which is effected through the system
of branding, a system which is consolidated by sympathetic legislation, amounts not
merely to a perpetuation of the number of possible places from which strategic
articulations might issue, but rather to a multiplication thereof. Or, as Lury observes,
“[t]he law’s role in the development of the sign … contributes not only to the asymmetrical nature of the communication that informs the objectivity of the brand, but also to its production of inequality” (2004: 14). In other words again, the classical conflict between the classes of capitalist and worker persists today in the form of a gulf between producers and consumers, a gulf that is not merely sanctioned but which is in fact widened and fortified by intellectual property laws.

The complicity of consumers
The idea that consumers may express themselves through the system of brands, or indeed define themselves in terms of it, raises the question of the complicity of said consumers in the reproduction of that system. Significantly, the fact of the apparent complicity of consumers in the system of branding—or, rather, their supposedly eager participation therein—is frequently evoked in defence of branding. This matter begs contemplation, if only by virtue of the fact that it once again brings to the fore the structure/agency problem, i.e., the question of the nature of subjectivity in the consumer society and that of the possible scope of agency therein.

Wally Olins, for his part, argues that

We like brands. If we didn’t like them, we wouldn’t buy them. It is we consumers who decide which brand will succeed and which will fail. Some brands are successful because people love them and can’t get enough of them; nobody forces anyone to buy a baseball cap with the Nike logo on it. Other brands fail because people simply don’t want them. (Olins 2003: 15)

In their book Pro Logo, itself an explicit rejoinder to Naomi Klein’s No Logo, Chevalier and Mazzalovo proffer an comparable line of argument in defence of the fashion industry—in which branding is, of course, thoroughly implicated, yet whose logic, incidentally, reciprocally underlies the whole system of branded objects—against the charge that the unrealistic canon of beauty which it presents is a cause of low self-esteem and that it is hence responsible for an upsurge in the number of people suffering from an eating disorder and in the number of young women undergoing plastic surgery:

Should we condemn fashion, and are the brands entirely responsible? Probably not. This is a game with two players, between the supply of and demand for fantasy, and often all the brands do is follow the trend. (2004: 44–45)

In this way, Chevalier and Mazzalovo render culpable, in no small part, those who might otherwise be understood as victims of the system of fashion. It is neither sufficient nor useful, however, to simply denounce such an analysis. Rather, we must recognise that what underlies this defence of branding is nothing other than an assumption of a certain mode of subjectivity—or, more accurately, an assumption of an almost unfettered agency of the consumer.⁶ ‘The customer’, after all, ‘is always

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⁶ Lury observes that “some of the most dominant economic perspectives today rely upon a notion of a calculating, self-interested individual” (2004: 5–6)—this is certainly true of Chevalier and Mazzalovo’s perspective, and of that of Olins also.
right’. For Chevalier and Mazzalovo, “[c]onsumers are the masters of the economic game and can impose their will” (2004: 222). The natural extension of this assumption of the agency of the consumer casts consumption as a democracy of the everyday—indeed, this, we might recall, is a fundamental premise of the ideology of contemporary capitalism. Unsurprisingly, this notion of consumption-as-democracy is none too subtle in the work of Chevalier and Mazzalovo; they claim that “it is the consumer who remains in charge and renders his or her verdict, just as in a political election” (2004: 204). Also:

The consumer is always the one who turns a commercial operation into a success or a failure. The act of purchase has at least two features in common with the democratic vote. First, it is the expression of an individual choice in the face of a diversified offering. Second, it makes sense only in its collective dimension, through the accumulation of all acts of purchase, out of which trends will develop. (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004: 226)

The act of purchase might very well have these two features in common with the democratic vote, but so too does it reproduce a fundamental conundrum of the concept of ‘democracy’, namely that democracy must always be at some point qualified or limited, and thus compromised, for the logical end of an unchecked freedom to act, permitted in the name of Democracy, will inevitably result in the denial of another’s apparently democratically accorded rights. As Rojek observes, after Baudrillard, “[t]he two great political struggles of the modern world—the struggle for freedom and the struggle for equality—are … both mutually incompatible and delusive” (1993: 115). As regards consumption, this antagonism is manifest most poignantly in the problem of labour ethics. That is to say, to give but one example, the apparent democracy afforded by the realm of consumption in the First World—which, mind you, is itself internally problematic—is frequently made possible by labour abuses in the Third (see Klein 2001a: 195–229). In this way, the ostensible democracy of consumption manifests the fundamental impossibility of Democracy and the radial contingency of all apparently democratic resolutions of the social.

A defence of branding that relies, at base, upon the assumption that “[c]onsumers are at the center of the system” (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004: 201) is problematic in one further—and very significant—regard. Even if we do not conversely hold that consumers’ actions are wholly governed by the system of branded exchange and consumption (and indeed we should not, as will be suggested below), such an assumption fails to recognise the structural ramifications of that system. Once more, unsurprisingly, such an oversight can be found in the argument of Chevalier and Mazzalovo. Again on the topic of fashion, they state:

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7 This may be contrasted with the critical (i.e., Marxist/post-Marxist) perspective, which is paradoxically characterised by a relative denial of the agency of the consumer. Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, surmise that the masses know not what they want; Horkheimer and Adorno do not contend that production is determined by the will of the consumer, but rather that the opposite is true, i.e., that “[t]he attitude of the public … is a part of the system” (1973: 122).
There is no “empire of the brands” that dictates fashion. The general volatility of the sector and the very rapid renewal of the dominant brands in this field are proof of that. (2004: 66)

Their first observation here is, for the most part, valid enough; the second, however, is more than a little problematic. What they fail to recognise is that, whilst there may well be no single ruling agent in the field of fashion, the system of fashion itself, though it should not be accorded agency per se, nevertheless plays what is effectively a dictatorial role through its structuring of the actions of those brands (and indeed also those consumers) which act within it and in accordance with it—further, its structure is in this way reproduced, potentially infinitely. As Debord has observed,

the commodity’s becoming worldly coincides with the world’s being transformed into commodities. So it is that, thanks to the cunning of the commodity, whereas all particular commodities wear themselves out in the fight, the commodity as abstract form continues on its way to absolute self-realization. (1994: 43)

In other words, Chevalier and Mazzalovo’s assumption of the agency of the consumer is based on the apparent absence of any one brand or ‘empire’ thereof that would control the world of fashion—if brands do not control fashion, then consumers, they conclude (wrongly), must in fact be at the centre of this system. This argument, which evokes as evidence the ‘very rapid renewal’ that characterises the field, is erroneous insofar as the ‘general volatility of the sector’ is of analytic significance not because it is an effect of the agency of consumers, but rather on account of the fact that it is itself a determining influence: the consumer is not forced to subscribe to one particular brand, but nor is she free, since she is compelled to discriminate between brands in the first place; she is under pressure, from the outset, to conform to the system’s logic of constant renewal. On this point, recall Baudrillard’s recognition of the fact that we ‘no longer even have the option of not choosing’.9 (Curiously enough, Chevalier and Mazzalovo actually seem to grasp, on occasion, the obligatory nature of consumers’ participation in the system of spectacular exchange: they state that brands “guide the purchases we make, influence our judgments about products and persons, and force us to position ourselves in relation to the values … they communicate” (2004: 27, my emphasis). And again: “[b]rands oblige us, through their presence in the commercial circuits, to position ourselves in relation to these values that they stand for” (2004: 27). Yet, in spite of the fact that the authors are blessed with these occasional insights, they fail to properly appreciate the implications thereof.)

**The radical significance of brands: the overdetermined object**

For all intents and purposes, everything that has been said thus far with respect to branding has portrayed it as consistent with the logic of capitalism, at once analogous

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9 Baudrillard also exposes the specious nature of that apparently democratic quality of consumption which Chevalier and Mazzalovo celebrate when he observes that ‘the possession of objects frees us only as possessors, and always refers us back to the infinite freedom to possess more objects: the only progression possible here is up the ladder of objects, but this is a ladder that leads nowhere’. These quotes from Baudrillard are cited and discussed above, in Chapter Three.
to and intermeshed with the commodity-form—hence, it would appear to be another vehicle through which the structural ills of the capitalist system become more deeply entrenched. In this view, any radical politics manifest through branded means would be most contradictory, and likely self-defeating. Such, however, is not necessarily the case, and indeed I should like to argue the opposite, namely that the institution of branding is in fact central to the very possibility of radical commodities. Or, more precisely: it is a significant shift on the part of the capitalist system toward quality, specifically a shift that is most patently manifest in the rise of branding, which permits the doing of activism through commodified means.

My argument here needs spelling out. The effective omnipresence of the logic of branding marks a momentous change in the capitalist system: no longer is it the case that the qualities of the social are quantified upon their incorporation into the system, such as was observed by Marx, specifically in the relationship between use-value and exchange-value. Rather, today, quality itself is internal to the system. As Lury observes, “it is the introduction of qualitative possibility that makes the emergence of the brand ... a significant development in the contemporary economy” (2004: 49). It is precisely this development that underlies the aforementioned relative decline of pecuniary emulation as compared with that which I have called ‘cultural emulation’. The former, of course, which is anchored in a logic of quantity, still plays a highly influential role—this should not be overlooked. That is to say, it is not the case that the role of the quantitative in the capitalist system of exchange has been overshadowed by that of the qualitative; rather, what is of significance is the (deceptively) simple fact that the logics of quantity and quality now co-exist within that system. Therefore, if considered in relation to Veblen’s analysis, style, for example, is no longer simply an adjunct to the system; it no longer serves merely as an indicator of wealth, but may in fact constitute a source of the same. This is not to say, however, that, in Marxian terms, use-value has become properly internal to capitalist exchange—whilst such may at first appear to be the case, it would be more accurate to instead understand that exchange-value is no longer strictly quantitative.

Lury (2004: 158) observes that the brand “offers [an opening] onto qualitative differentiation”, and that it “provides an alternative calculus to price by which the substitutability of products may be established”—thus, the brand constitutes nothing other than a qualitative exchange-value (oxymoronic though such a concept would be according to an orthodox Marxist perspective). Of course, we already have a name for such a value: ‘sign-value’. Specifically, consistent with what has been suggested above, we might understand that the rise of branding represents a dramatic explosion of the socioeconomic significance of sign-value, an explosion fuelled largely by the widespread recognition of its potential for capitalistic exploitation.

Lury also observes that the brand “provides the basis for the controlled re-introduction of quality into the means of exchange” (2004: 5). Now, whilst I certainly agree that the rise of the system of branding is consistent with a re-introduction of quality into the sphere of exchange, I would question the extent to which this process
is controlled, if by the use here of the term ‘controlled’ it is understood that this re-introduction of quality is to the exclusive benefit of commercial interests. Whilst we have recognised that objects may be polysemic—and we might understand, on this note, that branded objects may be especially so—the system of branded exchange is characterised not simply by polysemy, but rather by overdetermination. This, however, is not simply an overdetermination in the Freudian sense, whereby one idea may be manifest in multiple forms (see Freud 1976). Rather, this is an overdetermination in the Althusserian sense (see Althusser 1996: 87–128), which we might understand as a more explicitly reciprocal overdetermination, an overdetermination that exists—with regard to the question at hand—in the relationships between the various levels of branded exchange, from the concrete to the abstract, that is from the level of the discrete-but-branded object to that of the structure of the system of branded exchange itself, such that those contradictions which inhere in the branded object both manifest and determine, simultaneously (albeit paradoxically), the contradictions of the system of branding as a whole.

In terms of its implications as regards the doing of activism through the production of commodity-objects, the distinction between polysemy and overdetermination in the sphere of exchange is an immensely important one. Whilst a polysemous object might hold apparently oppositional meanings, it may nevertheless be entirely consistent with the ethic of capitalism, since, as we have seen, the offerings of the consumer society are nothing if not diversified. By consequence of the overdetermination of the branded object, however, the whole system of exchange becomes vulnerable to political critique. Allow me to explain. It was noted above that, to its credit, branding enables consumers to differentiate between products on grounds of product quality, yet product quality is by no means the sole qualitative criterion that branding brings to the sphere of exchange. Most notably, morality—which takes the form of such questions as the ethicality of a commodity’s production and its ecological sustainability—is no longer external to or divorced from the sphere of capitalist exchange, but rather it is, as a direct result of the radical growth of branding, properly internal thereto, probably irreversibly so. Thus, the move toward the incorporation of all of the qualities of the social into the sphere of branding has correspondingly opened the door for the critique of the system of (branded) exchange according to any number of properly social criteria—those of workers’ rights, animal rights, environmental sustainability, cultural sensitivity, community beneficence, etc. Indeed, here lie the roots of brand-based activism. As Naomi Klein observes,

Branding […] has taken a fairly straightforward relationship between buyer and seller and—through the quest to turn brands into media providers, arts producers, town squares and social philosophers—transformed it into something much more invasive and profound. For the past decade, multinationals like Nike, Microsoft and Starbucks

9 I am referring here to the possibility of the incorporation, by the dominant ideology, of the idea of Revolution—we will return to this discussion in the coming chapter.
The Front Line is Everywhere: For a Critique of Radical Commodities

have sought to become the chief communicators of all that is good and cherished in our
culture: art, sports, community, connection, equality. But the more successful this
project is, the more vulnerable these companies become: if brands are indeed intimately
entangled with our culture and our identities, when they do wrong, their crimes are not
dismissed as merely the misdemeanors of another corporation trying to make a buck.
(Klein 2001a: 335)

To reiterate, whilst the possibility of resistance to the machinations of capitalism of
course predates branding, the institution of branding renders the system of exchange
implicitly susceptible to critique. As Lury observes, “the contemporary brand marks a
new stage in the mediated relationship between producer and consumer” (2004: 18),
yet it must be recognised that the benefits to business which characterise this ‘new
stage’—namely the possibility of optimising marketing expenditure on a global scale,
the synchronisation (or ‘synergisation’) of product offerings, the opportunity to
develop more fervently loyal customers, and so on—are paralleled by an
unprecedented demand for accountability and transparency (popularly if not legislatively). Additionally, however, and more significantly, those developments
which have resulted in said commercial benefits also beget the channels through
which such accountability may be realised. Consider Naomi Klein’s account of a
meeting with an anti-sweatshop activist: “Nike, she told me, was not the target of her
activism, but a tool, a way to access a vast and often amorphous economic system”
(2001b). Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004: 71–72) explicitly draw out the same point:

Let’s suppose for a moment that these major brands don’t exist. Suppose that in the
sweatshops of the Third World, millions of pairs of unbranded, undifferentiated shoes
were produced, under execrable working conditions, before being sold via a network of
anonymous operators. How, then, could pressure be brought to bear on these hundreds
of small producers? It is precisely the existence of a brand like Nike that provides a
means of action and progress.

Here lies the radical significance of branding: since the brand constitutes a re-
introduction of quality into the sphere of capitalist exchange, it also constitutes a
potent opening for the qualitative critique of corporate practices and the conventions
of capitalism in general. Indeed, a brand perhaps constitutes a more potent fulcrum for
change than any which might be found in more conventional, juridical realms.

The significance of these developments, however, lies not only with the
possibility of the leveraging by activists of the reputation of a brand against
that brand’s owner. Rather, as Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004: 45–46) observe, “certain
brands have also responded to the wave of protest, and have gotten into the act of
challenging the dominant esthetic. This is the case, for example, with the Body Shop,
an English retailer of beauty and hygiene products, which bases its brand identity on
the values of protection of the environment, the use of natural ingredients, and above

Or, in other words, “[t]he more a brand becomes visible, the more it leaves itself open to public bashing and consumer
backlash” (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004: 70).
all the promotion of its customers’ self-esteem”.

The very fact that Chevalier and Mazzalovo would unflinchingly conceive of The Body Shop as a campaigning entity is significant here, for it points to the immense consequence of the institution of branding as regards radical commodities: curiously enough, it is by way of that overdetermination which inheres in the system of branding that the radical commodity itself becomes possible without contradiction. If the most conventionally capitalistic of ventures today presume of the system of exchange the internalisation of quality, there is by no means any inherent contradiction in the explicit conflation, manifest in radical commodities, of the sphere of capitalist exchange on the one hand and, on the other, social and political concerns that might traditionally have been deemed extrinsic to that system. That is to say, a radical object might formerly have become subject to the logic of the commodity by way of mismanagement or strategic defeat, or indeed purposely, in the interests of irony or semantic games. However, in any such scenario, the ethic of that object would either have remained properly external to the sphere of capitalist exchange, or it would have been wholly incorporated by the logic of the commodity. Today, however, we might understand that such an object’s radical essence can co-exist with the fact of its being a commodity—indeed, without contradiction. The very fact of the often-untroubled existence of the objects (sic) of this study serves as a compelling substantiation of this observation. Whilst contingent complications certainly persist, it remains the case that the arguments put forward through these radical commodities are not nullified by their status as commodity. This is evidenced by the fact that the critics of these objects respond not only to their form but also to their content. Most critics of *No Logo*, for example, respond to the arguments presented therein, and not exclusively, or even principally, to the apparently contradictory nature of the radical commodity that is *No Logo* itself. In sum, we might understand that the radical expansion of capitalism, such that it begins to subsume quality itself, has resulted in the possibility of genuinely insurgent activity within its own bounds. As Chevalier and Mazzalovo concededly observe, “[w]e may be at a historic crossroads of which a book like *No Logo*, despite its sometimes arguable conclusions, is a symptom” (2004: 224).

**Conclusion**

We have contemplated a number of deleterious implications of the rise of the system of branding, however we have also seen that the rise of branding runs hand-in-hand with changes in the capitalist system that are in fact central to the very possibility of radical commodities. Specifically, this ‘introduction of qualitative possibility’ permits the expression of ulterior values within the capitalist system. Yet, this should not be taken to mean that a radical project may proceed unhindered in the realm of commodities. Rather, whilst we have seen that a radical politics may exist within the sphere of commodities, the political potency of the radical commodity is far from

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11 Chevalier and Mazzalovo’s description of The Body Shop evokes Anita Roddick’s own conception of the company as a campaigning organisation, as an entity that “intended to be a force for social change” (Roddick 1991: 24).
guaranteed. Indeed, the possibility of the incorporation thereof remains wholly current, as we shall see.
9. The Thin Line: Radical Commodities and Incorporation

We have, thus far, spent much time determining the conditions under which the expression of a radical politics might be possible within the realm of commodities. However, we are yet to duly consider the possibility of the incorporation of radical commodities into that system which they would otherwise oppose—the question of incorporation is therefore the focus of this final chapter. Specifically, we will examine the strategic nuances of different modes of incorporation as pertain to radical commodities, but also the relationship between the production of radical commodities as a mode of resistance and the phenomenon of incorporation as a whole. We shall, in other words, contemplate whether the phenomenon of incorporation is to be understood as an unqualified threat to the political project manifest in radical commodities, or whether the processes of incorporation might, in fact, be leveraged to radical effect.

Incorporation through naturalisation and spectacularisation

We should begin with a brief reflection on the phenomenon of incorporation. Much in the way of useful analysis regarding this topic proceeds from the critical semiology of Barthes’s *Mythologies*. “Semiology [or, more accurately, Barthes himself] has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (Barthes 1973: 142). The phenomenon of incorporation has much in common with this elementary ideological operation (previously discussed in Chapter Four), which ‘transforms history into nature’. Specifically, Barthes has observed that “[m]yth can reach everything, corrupt everything, and even the very act of refusing oneself to it” (1973: 132, my emphasis). That is to say, even the most explicit opposition to the dominant order can be recast by the latter, and can thus be brought within its purview. A similar analysis is evident in Baudrillard’s observation that “all ideas, even the most contradictory, [are] capable of coexistence as signs in the idealist logic of consumption” (1996: 203).

Taking his impetus from Barthes, Dick Hebdige—in *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (1979), his analysis of post-war British youth subcultures and, in particular, their relationship to the dominant culture of the time—offers a more detailed critique of the strategies according to which oppositional social groups or movements are incorporated into the dominant order. With particular regard to subcultures, he argues that “[t]he process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms: (1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity-form); (2) the ‘labelling’ and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)”

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1 The title of this chapter is derived from a lyric—“the thin line between entertainment and war”—from the Rage Against The Machine song ‘Shelter’, which the group contributed to the soundtrack (Arnold 1998) of the movie *Godzilla*. 

We will address, for the moment, only the second of these—the so-called *ideological form* of incorporation. (Given the particular focus of this study, the ‘commodity’ form of incorporation deserves special attention, and so we will return to it in the coming section.) Hebdige’s conception of the ideological form of incorporation is derived explicitly from Barthes’s work, and, in particular, from the notion of *identification*, which is, in Barthes’s analysis, one of the seven principal figures in the rhetoric of myth (see Barthes 1973: 150–155). On the topic of identification, Barthes posits that

> The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the petit-bourgeois universe, all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. … This is because the Other is a scandal which threatens his existence. (Barthes 1973: 151)

But:

> Sometimes—rarely—the Other is revealed as irreducible: not because of a sudden scruple, but because *common sense* rebels: a man does not have a white skin, but a black one, another drinks pear juice, not *Pernod*. How can one assimilate the Negro, the Russian? There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. (Barthes 1973: 152)

Let us momentarily take a step backward, and contemplate just what it is that might seemingly constitute a threat to the dominant order, i.e., that which would be the object of incorporation. Hebdige (1979: 91) states that “[a]ny elision, truncation or convergence of prevailing linguistic and ideological categories can have profoundly disorienting effects. These deviations briefly expose the arbitrary nature of the codes which underlie and shape all forms of discourse”.

Some manner of deviation from ‘prevailing linguistic and ideological categories’ is central to all of those subcultures encompassed by Hebdige’s study; punk, however, is particularly notable in this regard, since it was punk that most explicitly disrupted social norms. Thus, with regard to punk: because it comprised such a deviation (from norms of conduct, music and dress), and thereby served to expose, however briefly, ‘the arbitrary nature of the codes which underlie and shape all forms of discourse’, the subculture constituted a marked threat to the dominant order. Hence, we may return to Hebdige’s explication, after Barthes, of the two basic strategic modes of ideological incorporation, the means by which a threat such as punk might be incorporated into the dominant order:

> Two basic strategies have been evolved for dealing with this threat. First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied (‘Otherness is reduced to sameness’). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into

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2 Barthes’s use of the capitalised ‘Other’—and also Hebdige’s subsequent usage thereof, which is consistent with that of Barthes—should not be confused with the Lacanian (big) Other, for the former is other to “the dream of the contemporary bourgeois world” (Barthes 1973: 150), whilst the latter (which includes language and society itself) is other to the subject.

3 We should note the parallel here with the disruptive effects of the Baudrillardian symbolic.
meaningless exotica, a ‘pure object, a spectacle, a clown’…. In this case, the difference is consigned to a place beyond analysis. (Hebdige 1979: 97)

Whilst such historically specific subcultures as the mods, punks and rockers in many ways differ, as a mode of resistance, from the phenomenon of radical commodities (which, mind you, is no less historically specific), there are also many parallels to be made, and indeed the means by which the ‘threat’ of radical commodities stands to be incorporated into the dominant order have much in common with those by which punk was ‘defused’ (to use a term favoured by Hebdige). Those analyses of incorporation proffered by Barthes and Hebdige, in other words, are most pertinent to our study of radical commodities. Hebdige (1979: 97) states that “the way in which subcultures are represented in the media makes them both more and less exotic than they actually are. They are seen to contain both dangerous aliens and boisterous kids, wild animals and wayward pets”. These ‘two basic strategies’ of ideological incorporation, which I will refer to as ‘naturalisation’ and ‘spectacularisation’, are similarly observable in the media’s reaction to radical commodities. Specifically, as regards the former, it is frequently the case that their critics in the media seek to naturalise radical commodities by recasting the political content of such objects as merely subsidiary to the profit motive. Marcel Knobil, for example, writing for The Observer, suggests that “[Naomi] Klein has artfully capitalised upon her fashionable No Logo brand, as has her publisher, Flamingo” (2000). In a similar vein, David Holthouse (1996) is quick to point out that RATM’s guitarist, Tom Morello, is “a leftist radical with a seven-digit savings balance”. In these instances, the fact of the commercial success of No Logo and of RATM’s music is used as ammunition in an attempt to tarnish their critical content. The individuals are recast as capitalists-in-disguise, thus Klein and Morello may be dismissed as ‘boisterous kids’ or ‘wayward pets’, and their criticisms of the status quo may be accordingly dismissed also.4

In contrast to these two examples, we also find that radical commodities are spectacularised, i.e., portrayed as more exotic than they actually are. This is perhaps most evident in the media’s sensationalisation of Klein’s role in the ‘anti-globalisation movement’ (a term which is itself manifoldly problematic): Barwick and Gordon (2001) have described her as “a Princess of Protest” and “the It-girl of anti-globalisation” (sic); Stern (2002) has dubbed her “the pin-up girl for social activism”. In such portrayals, Klein and her particular critical position converge to become one spectacular—and consumable—object. This is immensely significant, and we will shortly return to the question of the consumption of radicalism. Presently, however,

4 In a similar—albeit less explicit—example, Byron York paints a picture of Michael Moore as a red-blooded American capitalist, in spite of the filmmaker’s apparently aberrant politics. In an analysis of the consequence of Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 upon the 2004 US presidential election, York states that Moore “promot[ed] the movie as George W. Bush’s worst nightmare, generating an enormous amount of free coverage in the press. The point—other than to make money for Michael Moore—was to create the impression that Fahrenheit 9/11 had touched off an explosion of anti-Bush activism across the nation” (2005, my emphasis).
we should note that these embellished (and, incidentally, explicitly gendered) descriptions do not exactly serve to cast Klein and her critical position as ‘meaningless exotica’ (as Hebdige observed of the incorporation of subcultures). That is to say, a division is carved here not on grounds of symbolic Otherness, but simply on grounds of political Otherness. Hebdige (1979: 96–97) has observed that the punk movement constituted that which Stanley Cohen understood as a ‘folk devil’—a social group, frequently a subculture, that is the focus of a ‘moral panic’ (see Cohen 1972). Radical commodities, in contrast, typically constitute a different type of threat. That is to say, as compared to punk, the press can less readily construct the idea of a moral panic around radical commodities, their producers and their audiences, on account of the fact that the politics of radical commodities are typically explicitly articulated. Moreover, their politics is commonly manifest in their very form. This is in stark contrast to punk, which, beyond an ethic of unequivocal confrontationism, lacked a coherent political objective, or at least a readily discernable one. To cast radical commodities as folk devils, in other words, would be an all-to-obvious failure on the part of the conservative press to address the specific political arguments which are presented through and by these objects. In sum, radical commodities are not spurned as an irreconcilable Other (in the Barthesian, not the Lacanian, sense of ‘Other’). They are, however, certainly subject to being recast as spectacular objects, and specifically as spectacularly radical objects. Moreover, when recast in this way, radical commodities can in fact serve to maintain—like folk devils—the ascendancy of the dominant order. This strategic inversion, and the means by which it might be effected, constitutes the focus of much of this chapter.

The commodity form of incorporation

It was mentioned above that Hebdige proposes two forms of incorporation: the ‘commodity’ form and the ‘ideological’ form. We have just discussed the ideological form of incorporation, and have recognised that it, in turn, comprises two principal strategies, which I have termed ‘naturalisation’ and ‘spectacularisation’. It is the commodity form of incorporation, however, that now begs discussion. Given the object of the present study, this form of incorporation is, unsurprisingly, most relevant. Moreover, this topic has a bearing upon a number of other issues that are of significance to us.

Hebdige states that, in the commodity form of incorporation, the threat posed by oppositional subcultures is defused by way of ‘the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced objects’. More specifically, he argues that

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5 An exception to this statement may be found in the press’s reaction to the benefit concert organised by RATM to support the defence fund of Mumia Abu-Jamal (see Strauss 1999). The concert, held in East Rutherford, New Jersey, on 28 January, 1999, featured not only Rage Against The Machine but also The Beastie Boys and Bad Religion. It was decried by police support groups and by the then-Governor of New Jersey.

6 The notable exception to this observation (that the politics of radical commodities are presented front and centre) is Freitag, and yet it is precisely on account of the fact that its politics are, unusually, less explicitly articulated that Freitag constitutes such a valuable inclusion in this study.
as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. (Hebdige 1979: 96)

It should be pointed out here that there is, implicit in Hebdige’s notion of the commodity form of incorporation, a recognition of that which would be understood in Baudrillardian terms as the sign-value of the commodity. Yet, further to this, it should be understood that the process of commodification does not alone constitute this form of incorporation; rather, mass production is in fact fundamental to that which Hebdige calls the ‘commodity form’ of incorporation. That is to say, it is not the commercial exchange of punk objects that disarms the subculture, for such exchange is already carried out within the subculture’s own bounds. Nor, however, is it the exchange of punk objects as signs that is disarming, for it is precisely as signs that these objects hold value for the members of the subculture. Rather, although it is initially on account of the quality of the commodity as sign that the commodity form of incorporation becomes possible, it is ultimately through the mass production (more precisely, the mass reproduction) of its signs that the subcultural threat is defused. Safety pins, for example, are no longer shocking when everyone is wearing them as a fashion accessory. In other words, although Hebdige posits that commodification results in “the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of the subcultural style” (1979: 93), such an observation is not entirely correct. It is true that, on a practical level, the processes of diffusion and defusion are simultaneous, and are thus effectively indistinguishable, but, on closer inspection, it may be seen that diffusion in fact precedes defusion, which is to say that it is by way of the diffusion of its signs (i.e., the mass production of its representative sign-objects) that the subcultural menace is defused.

Regardless of this causal distinction, in so becoming ‘public property’, the subcultural signs are also naturalised (and thus so too is the subculture itself). For this reason, as Hebdige observes, “the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the ‘real’/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form” (1979: 96).

The consumption/consummation of Revolution
It might be assumed that the commodity form of incorporation would not pose a threat to radical commodities, since these are objects which are already commodities, wholly and from the outset. Such an assumption, however, would be erroneous. I have argued that the essence of what Hebdige calls the ‘commodity form’ of incorporation is in fact not the process of commodification itself, but rather that of mass production/reproduction. In view of this, we may appreciate the particular way in which the commodity form of incorporation threatens the political efficacy of radical commodities: it is not radical commodity-objects themselves which stand to be
incorporated into the capitalist system, since they are already, by definition, formally internal to it, but rather it is their political project and their oppositional values which are in jeopardy of being diffused and thus defused. It is, in other words, the autonomy of the idea of Revolution which is at stake.\(^7\)

The diffusion of the idea of Revolution, however, does not alone result in the defusion of the possibility of revolution, in spite of what has been said above. (If this were the case, the notion of a radical commodity would be internally contradictory—moreover, the globally distributed commodities that we are examining would represent the height of such a contradiction.) Rather, it is through the consumption of the (diffuse) idea of Revolution that the possibility of revolution stands to be defused. I shall explain. We have established that objects may function as signs, and we have seen that the structure of the sign is itself anything but neutral (in spite of the fact that it gives the appearance of being so—see Chapter Three), yet we have not properly considered the particularities of the act of consumption, specifically the implications of the consumption of objects as signs. On this topic, valuable material is once more to be found in Baudrillard’s early work. (It is necessary, however, to briefly revisit here some conceptual territory already covered in earlier chapters.) He posits that

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\text{[the] conversion of the object to the systematic status of a sign implies the simultaneous transformation of the human relationship into a relationship of consumption—of consuming and being consumed. … The relationship is no longer directly experienced: it has become abstract, been abolished, been transformed into a sign-object, and thus consumed. … Here we discover, in its most extreme expression, the formal logic of the commodity as analysed by Marx: just as needs, feelings, culture, knowledge—in short, all the properly human faculties—are integrated as commodities into the order of production, and take on material form as productive forces so that they can be sold, so likewise all desires, projects and demands, all passions and all relationships, are now abstracted (or materialized) as signs and as objects to be bought and consumed. (Baudrillard 1996: 200-201)}
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Everything is vulnerable to this process of abstraction, not least of all nature itself:

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\text{The order of Nature (primary functions, instinctual drives, symbolic relationships) is everywhere present in the system, but present only as signs. … What emerges from the realm of signs is a nature continuously dominated, an abstract, worked-upon nature…. This nature has been systematized: it is not so much nature as naturalness…. (Baudrillard 1996: 64)}
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To say that the system of signs abstracts and systematises all that becomes subject to it is nothing new to us; we have discussed this phenomenon on a number of occasions. The present significance of such an analysis, however, lies with Baudrillard’s assertion that such “naturalness is basically a disavowal of Nature”

\(^7\) My use here of the term ‘Revolution’, capitalised and in preference to any other, follows Baudrillard’s usage of the same, such as will be seen shortly.
Moreover, the system of signs acts in this way not only upon Nature, but also, for example, upon History—thus, “historicalness is a refusal of history masked by an exaltation of the signs of history: history simultaneously evoked and denied” (Baudrillard 1996: 74n).

Hence, the relevance of Baudrillard’s above analysis to the question of incorporation begins to become apparent: the revolutionary project necessarily numbers among those ‘desires, projects and demands’ that are ‘now abstracted as signs and as objects to be bought and consumed’. In view of this, we might, in keeping with Baudrillard’s analysis, conceive of a ‘radicalness’ of objects and signs, which is to say that those radical commodities which exalt the signs of Revolution might in fact simultaneously deny the possibility of revolution. This question—of the incorporation of the idea of Revolution into the system of signs, specifically by way of its reduction to signs—is one which Baudrillard expressly addresses. He posits that “[t]he demand for revolution is … a living demand, but so long as it is not actualised in practice it will be consumed as the idea of Revolution” (1996: 203). Baudrillard is here explicitly playing upon the dual meanings of the one French word (‘consommer’) that translates as both ‘to consume’ and ‘to consummate’. To the previous statement, therefore, he adds:

Consumed, that is, and at the same time consummated—hence also destroyed. To say that the revolution is consumed/consummated in the idea of the Revolution means that the revolution is both fulfilled (formally) and abolished in that idea; and what is presented as already realized is thenceforward consumable in an unmediated manner.

(Baudrillard 1996: 203n)

In other words, if it is understood by consumers that the consumption of the signs of revolution constitutes a form of truly revolutionary action, then the revolutionary project is indeed consummated, and thenceforth abolished, since the demand for revolution is fulfilled through such consumption.

In light of this understanding of consumption as consummation, we must once again reassess Hebdige’s notion of the commodity form of incorporation: it is not, in the final analysis, the mass (re)production of oppositional signs which ultimately disarms such signs of their political content; rather, it is the mass consumption thereof which drives the final nail into the coffin of Revolution. Thus, the implications of Baudrillard’s analysis here extend far beyond the question of incorporation—or, 

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8 In The System of Objects (1996)—which, it will be remembered, is a critical semiological survey of interior design, reminiscent of Barthes’s Mythologies—Baudrillard observes that antique objects, particularly insofar as they are contrasted with modern objects in an interior, connote ‘historicalness’. Specifically, “the antique object … presents itself as a myth of origins” (Baudrillard 1996: 76), and so it would appear to embody History itself. However: “no matter how authentic [an antique] is, there is always something false about it. And indeed, it is false in so far as it puts itself forward as authentic within a system whose basic principle is by no means authenticity but, rather, the calculation of relationships and the abstractness of signs” (Baudrillard 1996: 74). Thus, by way of the very presence of this object whose purpose, within the modern interior, is to signify history, History is abolished.

9 Baudrillard posits that “[w]hen we speak of naturalness (naturalité) and ‘culturalness’ (culturalité), the ‘-ness’ is the important thing: the French suffix ‘-ité’ always marks the shift to an abstract, secondary meaning operating at the level of signs” (Baudrillard 1996: 64n).
rather, his analysis radically reframes the question of incorporation, dramatically extending its scope. That is to say, Baudrillard’s notion of the consumption/consummation of Revolution describes not merely the disarming of particular radical tendencies, but rather an incorporation of the revolutionary project in its entirety, and thus a disarming of the very possibility of revolution itself.

This is an idea which begs further discussion, indeed in more empirical terms. So as to inform this discussion, however, let us recall Baudrillard’s conception of the four ‘successive phases of the image’, which describe a progressively increasing abstraction of the image from ‘a profound reality’:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the absence of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (1994: 6)

If we might employ this formulation rather liberally, it constitutes a useful schema according to which we can map the various degrees by which the signs of revolution might be abstracted from a materially radical practice.

The different radical commodities which we have singled out for study all aspire to something of a revolutionary reality, which is to say that they (apparently) seek to effect such substantive or material changes as: environmentally sound production practices (Freitag, The Body Shop and Adbusters’ Blackspot shoes); fair trade (The Body Shop and Adbusters’ Blackspot shoes); closed-loop recycling (The Body Shop); freedom of expression and association, and the just trial of members of racial minorities (RATM); grassroots political organisation (Naomi Klein); more humanitarian corporate policies (Naomi Klein and Michael Moore); and increased participation in the electoral system (Michael Moore). These radical commodities therefore put forward a revolutionary face that purportedly reflects a truly radical core. In actuality, however, we might note that the face of the radical commodity is more likely to be, according to our construal of Baudrillard’s formulation, an image of the second order: what radical commodities project is likely a revolutionary façade, albeit an image that does not necessarily denature so much as it exaggerates a revolutionary reality—radical commodities, in other words, are frequently more radical in appearance than in practice. Rage Against The Machine, for example, might have participated in a number of benefit concerts over the years, but the sum of money thereby contributed to the various political and charitable organisations which benefited from those concerts would nevertheless pale in comparison to the band members’ takings over the course of their careers. And yet, in spite of the probability of such exaggeration, we might understand that the consumption of radical commodities does indeed constitute something of a properly revolutionary act, insofar as the signs of Revolution are here linked—at least to some degree—with material practices that stand to effect substantive change.

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10 This was previously cited in Chapter Four, but it is worthwhile repeating it here.
In contrast, if the signs of revolution employed by radical commodities become incorporated into the dominant order—i.e., if they are made diffuse—yet if they are subsequently consumed with the view that such consumption still constitutes some manner of revolutionary act, they move from the second to the third order of the image, which is to say that they begin to mask the absence of a profoundly revolutionary reality. Take, for example, the oft-reproduced image of Che Guevara’s face—itself an abstraction of Alberto Korda’s photograph *The Heroic Guerrilla*, of 1960—which has been described as “the all-purpose symbol of revolution and idealism” (Brown 2003: 55). Rage Against The Machine consistently hung a flag bearing that image onstage during their concerts, and used the image on the cover of a single. Additionally, Tom Morello, the group’s guitarist, has claimed that:

> [o]f course evoking the symbols of revolutionaries like Che Guevara, Angela Davis and Emeliano Zapata means little in and of itself, but when you link them to the modern day struggles of Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier, the Zapatistas and battles against police brutality … it demonstrates that young people today can be part of an ongoing resistance to oppression. … We have allied ourselves with people like Che and Angela because their struggles directly relate to the struggles of today. (Morello 1996)

Morello thus acknowledges that an image like that of Che is today essentially devoid of revolutionary meaning *per se*, but alleges also that the image can be reinvested with political significance if it is associated with contemporary struggles, such as those for which he and his group are self-professed spokespersons. In its original context, Che’s image would almost certainly have reflected the revolutionary spirit of the man himself and of a people. Today, in the employ of Rage Against The Machine, we might understand that the image exaggerates the revolutionary reality of a rock-music commodity that is only partially activist.\(^1\) Ultimately, however, such exaggeration is of relatively minor concern: the same image can be found on any number of decidedly non-radical commodities, and if any of these are consumed as the object of an apparently revolutionary act—that is, if a consumer believed that their consumption of such objects constituted, in itself, a revolutionary act, or that such consumption is itself sympathetic with Che’s cause and ideals—then the object in question would be consumed as a signifier of revolution, albeit behind which there lies no revolutionary reality. Consumed in this way, the image of Che *masks the absence* of a revolutionary reality, and yet it must be reiterated that the consumption of the idea of Revolution (e.g., the sympathetic consumption of the image of Che Guevara) does not merely mask the absence of the possibility of revolution, but so too does it *produce that absence of possibility*, which is to say that such consumption *abolishes the possibility* of revolution. In other words, if it is understood by consumers that the proliferation and the consumption of the signs of Revolution

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\(^1\) I say ‘partially activist’ since, in spite of the radical content of their songs, their participation in numerous benefit concerts and their advocacy of various activist organisations—in short, however well-intentioned or even politically effective we might deem the group to be—the fact of the matter is that the sale of their music still generates profits for Sony, and this cannot be overlooked.
constitutes the realisation of revolution, then any possibility of (actual) revolution is thereafter denied. This is what is meant by the consumption/consummation of Revolution.

**Radical chic**

Up to this point, our discussion of the consumption of Revolution has placed much onus on the perceptions and interpretations of the consumer (albeit not always explicitly so). Moreover, the consumer has, in our analysis thus far, been pitted against an apparently amorphous sphere of objects and signs. Now, whilst the question of consumers’ interpretations is an important one, it should also be recognised that the world of objects and signs is subject to various ebbs and flows which mediate consumers’ relationships with that world; these ebbs and flows namely constitute the phenomenon of fashion. The question of fashion holds particular significance as regards the study of radical commodities, since, as will be seen, the idea of revolution plays no small part in the logic of fashion. By the same token, however, the logic of fashion constitutes one of the most potent means by which a radical project might be defused. The question of the relationship between radical commodities and fashion is therefore bipartite: we must examine both the inherently revolutionary nature of fashion and the (apparently inherent) fashionability of radicalism. (Although perhaps needless to say, it should be pointed out, in the interests of forestalling any misunderstanding, that the logic of fashion is not confined to the fashion industry itself. As Baudrillard posits, “[t]he logical processes of fashion might be extrapolated to the dimension of ‘culture’ in general—to all social production of signs, values and relations” (1981: 79). Indeed, he even goes so far as to say that “[f]ashion and the commodity are a single, identical form” (1981: 206).)

Let us begin by recalling Barthes’s argument that myth ‘transforms history into nature’, which we discussed in Chapter Four. Barthes has said that bourgeois ideology “cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world, fixated this world into an object which can be for ever possessed, catalogued its riches, embalmed it, and injected into reality some purifying essence which will stop its transformation, its flight towards other forms of existence” (1973: 155). I would contend that this ‘purifying essence’ is nothing other than the logic of fashion. Of course, the notion that the logic of fashion arrests change is rather paradoxical, since the system of fashion would appear to be characterised by change. Yet, the system of fashion in fact comprises a relentless pursuit of the model, which, as Baudrillard has stated, is ‘a transcendence internal to the system’ that allows the system to ‘continue in its forward flight indefinitely’. There is an important distinction to be made here between the ‘forward flight’ mentioned by Baudrillard and the ‘flight towards other forms of existence’ mentioned by Barthes: the former is in fact merely a semblance of the latter. Indeed, the ‘forward flight’ of fashion is not progressive at all; it has the

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12 Some of the ideas and material discussed here have been seen in previous chapters, but it is worth bearing a little repetition.

13 This quotation from Baudrillard was previously cited and discussed in Chapter Three.
character of running on a treadmill—it gives merely the illusion of progress, and it is precisely in this way that it serves to circumvent any real transformation of the world. The following passage was cited already in Chapter Three, but it is most pertinent to the present discussion, and so it bears repeating:

Fashion—and more broadly, consumption, which is inseparable from fashion—masks a profound social inertia. It itself is a factor of social inertia, insofar as the demand for real social mobility frolics and loses itself in fashion, in the sudden and often cyclical changes of objects, clothes and ideas. (Baudrillard 1981: 50-51)

The logic of fashion, in other words, represents nothing other than the internalisation of the logic of Revolution by the system of production. Fashion is an unending sequence of manageable revolutions, which disguise a underlying stasis. In light of this, it can be seen that the pervasive logic of fashion is fundamental to the consumption/consummation of the idea of Revolution. More specifically, we can appreciate the ease with which unspecific demands for revolution (such as those typically characteristic of the punk movement) can be incorporated into the system of objects and signs—this is a system which is founded upon the idea of revolution, and it is for this reason happy to accommodate such demands.

Precisely such an understanding of the incorporative power of fashion is to be found in Hebdige’s discussion of subcultures. He states that “[y]outh cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions” (1979: 96). This, he argues, happens irrespective of the startling content of the style: punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in September of that year Cosmopolitan ran a review of Zandra Rhodes’ latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme. Models smouldered beneath mountains of safety pins and plastic (the pins were jewelled, the ‘plastic’ wet-look satín) and the accompanying article ended with an aphorism—‘To shock is chic’—which presaged the subculture’s imminent demise. (Hebdige 1979: 96)

If it is understood that the whole cyclical system of the production and consumption of objects and signs is based upon a logic of revolution, it should not require any great leap of analytic faith to conclude that the idea of Revolution may be innately susceptible to incorporation into the system of fashion. According to the reportage of Bernice Harrison (2000), Naomi Klein “[w]ith her tongue firmly in her cheek … admits that anti-multinational activism is now so fashionable that it was to the 1990s what saving the whale was to the 1980s”. Of course, any particular radical commodity, or indeed radical commodities in general, might become fashionable, as might any object, person or idea today, and yet the apparent irony in Klein’s comment belies the fact that, so far as radical commodities are concerned, such a possibility is a

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14 The passage as it is reproduced here is merely a portion of that which was previously cited; it is worth noting that Baudrillard goes on to state that fashion “wishes to be beyond social logic, a kind of second nature”—cf. the Barthesian notion that myth ‘transforms history into nature’.
most perilous one, since, as Hebdige observes of punk, oppositional objects or signs which become drawn into sphere of fashion stand to be rapidly and thoroughly stripped of their radical content.15

Curiously, of the cases we are examining, it is perhaps Klein’s *No Logo* which has been most frequently associated with—or denigrated as—fashionable radicalism. This is possibly attributable, at least in part, to the refined design of the object itself.16 Deborah Orr, for one, does not fail to notice that “the book itself is a matt-black object of covetable loveliness” (2000). Leonard Stern (2002) similarly deems the book’s appearance worthy of comment; he has posited that, “[w]ith its black cover (the colour of bohemian chic), *No Logo* became less a book than an accessory, to be brandished like a Che Guevera T-shirt, something every self-respecting rebel stuffs into his khaki knapsack before heading to a demonstration”. Stern’s comment of course touches upon the bigger issue of the consumption of *No Logo* as a sign-value, that is, the consumption of the book as a signifier of dissent.17 The question of the consumption of *No Logo* as a sign-value, however, belongs, in turn, to a broader discussion of the very fine line that distinguishes a revolutionary consumption from a consumption of revolution (i.e., from a consumption/consummation of revolution). Indeed, it is fitting that Stern would compare *No Logo*, as an object, to a Che Guevara t-shirt, since, in so becoming a fashion accessory, *No Logo* is effectively stripped of its critical content, just like the image of Che and the accoutrements of punk, as discussed above. In other words, in spite of the incisive critique that it otherwise comprises, *No Logo* stands to become, in this way, a pure signifier, and indeed less a signifier of a political position than of a stylistic one.18

Notably, Klein’s US publisher, Random House, has contributed to precisely such a transformation of *No Logo* from critical text to fashion accessory. Steve Burgess reports on this:

*Capitalism—you just can’t beat it*, Naomi Klein. As the author of last year’s non-fiction bestseller *No Logo*, Klein became the standard bearer for foes of corporate consumerism, and the scourge of those who seek to borrow a personality from brand-

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15 Whilst Hebdige’s example makes specific mention of the fashion industry, it should also be reiterated that it is not merely by way of assimilation into the fashion industry proper that the logic of fashion may serve to neutralise the political content of an otherwise oppositional object. Moreover, the subjection of radical objects to the logic of fashion might be understood as a precursor to the consumption/consummation of the idea of Revolution.

16 Notably, *No Logo* was designed by renowned Canadian designer Bruce Mau, who, moreover, was Design Director at Zone Books for the period 1985–2004, during which time he designed, incidentally, Zone’s release of Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*.

17 It is worth noting that there is, implicit in Stern’s specific reference to the cover of *No Logo*, the suggestion that the design of the book played no small part in its apparent transformation from critique to accessory. There is probably more than a grain of truth in such an analysis, and, this being the case, no shortage of irony. That is to say, the qualities which would have set *No Logo* apart from other critical texts on the shelf, namely a catchy title and an attractive cover, were likely responsible, at least in part, for the fact that its readers—or at least its purchasers—numbered in the millions, unlike those of so many other similar texts. (I, for one, first became aware of *No Logo* when its title and cover design caught my eye whilst passing a bookstore window.) In turn, however, it is likely on account of the combined factors of an agreeable appearance and the exponentially increasing visibility begot by commercial success that *No Logo* became such an apparently covetable object, and thus that its sign-value surpassed, in some circles at least, its significance as critical analysis.

18 I should point out that I do not believe that *No Logo* is in every instance ‘less a book than an accessory’. Nevertheless, I feel that it is certainly common enough an occurrence to warrant attention here.
name sneakers and designer togs. *No Logo* was the veritable bible of Seattle’s anti-WTO brigades.

Unfortunately, you lie down with dogs and you wake up with fleas. Klein’s dog appears to be her publisher, Random House. You can hardly blame her for getting her book published—no sense being an anti-corporate-branding tree falling in a lonely forest, and a prominent publisher helped spread her message to a receptive audience. But as dogs must chase cars, publishers must promote their books.

Thus there came to be an ad recently in the *National Post*, featuring a reprint of an actual personal ad, the I-saw-you kind: “No Logo, Jan 2 sb Yng subw. U handsome Me reading. Me excited by yr literary choice. Too gobsmackd 2talk. Let’s meet?”

Underneath the reprinted ad in large letters were the words: “The political is also a personal.” Beside a picture of *No Logo* ran the slogan: “More than a revolutionary call to action.”

More than a revolutionary call to action? Darn right, Jack—it’s also a fashion statement. Take another look at that personal ad and absorb its true meaning. There is no sexier accessory to catch an idealistic young co-ed than a little flourish of Klein, tucked in the arm of that cable-knit turtleneck. Don’t sweat the studying part—ever since Stephen Hawking’s breakthrough with *A Brief History of Time*, books have moved away from their traditional role as content providers toward a more decorative function. Thanks to Random House’s canny marketing, *No Logo* is set to be bigger than the Hermes scarf or *The Satanic Verses*. Once upon a time, a lustful young man went on the prowl adorned with Boss or Hilfiger or Klein. So last-decade. Now all they need is Klein—this year’s model.

Bruce Cockburn once said that he began his musical career determined not to have an image. And one day he found himself with a well-entrenched image as The Guy Who Wants to Avoid an Image. That’s the cultural marketplace, God love it.

Anyone know where I can find a *No Logo* T-shirt? (Burgess 2001)

In remarking that there is ‘no sense being an anti-corporate-branding tree falling in a lonely forest’, Burgess touches upon a point that was discussed in Chapter Seven, namely the opportunity afforded by the complex system of commodity production and distribution to reach a large audience, which might be understood as one of the principal motivations behind the production of radical commodities. Yet, with regard to our present discussion, Burgess’s article also attests to the extent to which radical commodities are thereby implicated in those systems and institutions which they would otherwise criticise. Although radical commodities might *ideally* comprise a radical alternative to the status quo, their very being as commodity of course draws them into the fold of the dominant order. This occurs principally by way of the sphere of signification, that is, by way of their subjection to a logic of difference. As Baudrillard observes,

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19 Obviously enough, even a very short newspaper article makes for a lengthy quotation when it is reproduced in its entirety, but Burgess’s article is nevertheless reproduced here in full, since it bears upon a number of important issues.
Objects, ideas, even conduct are not solely practiced as use values, by virtue of their ‘objective’ meaning, in terms of their official discourse—for they can never escape the fact that they may be potentially exchanged as signs, i.e., assume another kind of value entirely in the very act of exchange and in the differential relation to the other that it establishes. The differential function of sign exchange always overdetermines the manifest function of what is exchanged, sometimes entirely contradicting it, repossessing it as an alibi, or even producing it as an alibi. (1981: 78)

We may understand, after Baudrillard, that Burgess’s above observation that ‘books have moved away from their traditional role as content providers toward a more decorative function’ refers to objects whose use-values have been repossessed as alibis of their sign-values. Allow me, however, to clarify the implications of such an analysis upon radical commodities: as a result of their complicity in the system of sign exchange, that critique of the dominant order which radical commodities present, or which they constitute, stands to be dissolved in its positive aspects—i.e., its properly critical and radical aspects—such that it retains value only negatively, that is, as a point of difference.20 Radical commodities become, in this way, complicit in a system of emulative consumption.

This point deserves further explanation. We saw, in Chapter Three, that the concept of the individual is a foundation stone of the system of consumption. Moreover, the concept of the individual is manifest in the consumer society as the promise of the possibility of the realisation of the individual self, and indeed we might understand that the quest for such self-realisation on the part of consumers underlies many consumption habits. With this mind, it can be seen that the consumption of radical commodities may in certain cases—or, perhaps, in many cases—be motivated not by political or ethical beliefs, but rather by a desire to assert one’s individuality. This, however, is not the extent of the phenomenon. Rather, the consumption of a radical commodity may be motivated not merely by a desire to differentiate oneself from others, but also by a desire to distinguish oneself as better than others. In short, we must, at this point, recall Veblen’s notion of emulation. Specifically, the (conspicuous) consumption of a radical commodity may be motivated by a logic of cultural emulation (that is, by a desire to be cooler than others, as was discussed in the previous chapter), or a logic of moral emulation (i.e., a one-upmanship on grounds of morality, such as was briefly contemplated in Chapter Two—see the section ‘The non-invidious commodity’). The latter scenario is of course particularly applicable to the consumption of ethically projected commodities. Yet, regardless of whether it is consumed in pursuit of being cooler, more upstanding, or simply different, a radical commodity so consumed becomes anything but radical—it is transformed into an empty signifier, a signifier of an ultimately inessential difference. It is just such a transformation which Random House’s ‘The political is also a personal’

20 It will be recalled that radical commodities may not only present a critique of the dominant order, but that they may also constitute such a critique, insofar as there is inscribed in the very materiality of ethical commodities, in particular, an implicit critique of the status quo—see the section “The radicalism of difference”, in Chapter Seven.
advertisement at once describes and engenders, namely a depoliticisation of No Logo. In other words, through the consumption of radical commodities as fashion-objects (i.e., as *sign-values*), those values which such commodities represent or embody are themselves abstracted and aestheticised, and so defused. Moreover, as Baudrillard has remarked, objects or ideas ‘can never escape the fact that they may be potentially exchanged as signs’. That is to say, this process of incorporation into the system of sign exchange—a system of purely differential value—is one to which “nothing is immune” (Baudrillard 1981: 78). Indeed, this extends even to the idea of ‘anti-consumption’: as Keedy (2003: 207) has observed, ostensibly disenfranchised consumers are able to “accessorize their dissent with *Adbusters* magazine and a copy of Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*, this fall’s coolest anti-consumer consumables”. Even the most explicit denunciation of contemporary capitalism is thus recuperated by the system. In fact, the ‘anti-consumer consumable’ perhaps represents the epitome of the consumption/consummation of the idea of Revolution.

‘Anti-brand brands’ and the impossibility of externality

Implicit in Keedy’s sardonic reference to ‘anti-consumer consumables’ is an analysis of radical commodities that we cannot afford to ignore, an analysis which describes an outcome of the consumption of radical commodities that is nothing less than antithetical in relation to the apparent political objectives of the production of such objects. This, however, is a matter to which we shall return in the next section, for it is presently necessary to emphasise the extent of Baudrillard’s observation that ‘nothing is immune’ to incorporation into the logic of sign exchange.

Firstly, I should like to point out that whilst the idea of anti-consumer consumables relates specifically to radical commodity-objects, an analogous phenomenon is observable in the sphere of brands also. For example, whilst *No Logo* the book might be understood as an anti-consumer consumable, *No Logo* the brand might be understood—no less paradoxically—as an *anti-brand brand*. Indeed, as regards my present concern with illustrating the consequence of Baudrillard’s claim that anything may potentially be exchanged as a sign, anti-brand brands are more pertinent than their more material counterparts.

In Chapter Three, we discussed the elementary Saussurean formulation of the differential character of signification; in Chapter Seven, we saw that it might be leveraged to radical effect by way of ethically projected commodities; presently, we will see that this differential logic also has detrimental effects upon radical commodities. It should be stated, forthwith, that an explicit denunciation of the system of branding is not inconsistent with that system itself. Rather, paradoxically, the opposite is the case. A critique of the system of sign exchange—a system that is

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21 Burgess is therefore mistaken when he states, in the above-quoted article, that *No Logo* is a revolutionary call to action and also a fashion statement—it may be either a revolutionary call to action or a fashion statement, but it cannot, for the one person, be both simultaneously. To reiterate, so soon as it becomes a fashion accessory, it can no longer fully function as a call to action, since, as a fashion accessory, its radical meaning is compromised, aestheticised—it thus contributes to the creation of a radicalism that is in the first instance simply consumable, but which is ultimately consumed/consummated.
The Front Line is Everywhere: For a Critique of Radical Commodities

founded upon a logic of difference—cannot be properly external to that system, since such a critique carves out or relies upon a difference that is in fact entirely consistent with the system’s own logic. Criticism of such a system, in other words, does not serve to separate one from that system, but paradoxically stands to draw one into it. At the extreme, for example, a useful—communicable—critique of language cannot be proffered without also perpetuating the latter, that is, without being complicit in the reproduction of language. We might understand that it is this basic problematic which informs Baudrillard’s assertion that ‘positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system’. An equivalent problem is observable in the sphere of brands—and, unsurprisingly, such a phenomenon is particularly eminent among radical commodities. Marcel Knobil, for example, has remarked that Naomi Klein has been so successful that she has become a powerful political brand in her own right. If you choose Klein—Naomi, not Calvin—you want the world to know: ‘I am not someone who needs to depend on badges to convey who I am. I am an individual in my own right who despises brands and cares for society.’ (2000)

Needless to say, the idea that one would choose the Klein/No Logo brand when one despises brands is most paradoxical, not least when one chooses such a brand to let the world know that one does not need to depend on brands in order to convey one’s identity. Yet, it must be pointed out that it is not the consumers of anti-brand brands who are responsible for this contradiction. Nor, however, is it necessarily the fault of the producers of such brands. Rather, as intimated above, it is by virtue of the logic of the very system of branding itself that the denunciation of branding—i.e., the ‘anti-brand’ position—may come to resemble, for all intents and purposes, a brand in itself. Let us further examine this point.

No Logo is of course not alone in its status as an anti-brand brand; in fact, Adbusters—and, in particular, its Blackspot sneaker venture—is even more relevant than No Logo to the present discussion. Specifically, the fact that a particular anti-brand viewpoint might come to be understood as equivalent to a brand itself is illustrated perfectly by the case of the Blackspot project. After all, this is a self-professed “anticorporation”, replete—by Kalle Lasn’s own admission (quoted in Walker 2004)—with an “antilogo”. Furthermore, it has been identified, in so many words, as an “anti-brand”, and indeed repeatedly so (see Walker 2004; Diebenow 2005; Arevalo 2005). It comes as no surprise, then, that comparisons are made between this ‘antibrand’ and unabashed or ‘real’ brands, between this ‘anticorporation’ and real corporations, and between its ‘antilogo’ and real logos. There are many reasons to conclude that the distinctions at work here are tenuous indeed, not least of all the fact that this antibrand differs from a real brand in name alone—and the same applies in the case of its antilogo. As regards the incorporation of the anti-brand viewpoint, however, the distinctions—or lack thereof—between the system of brands and an opposition thereto need not be so pronounced as they are in the case of the Blackspot antibrand. That is to say, an antagonistic entity need not
identify itself as an anticorporation with an antibrand and an antilogo to be drawn, in this way, into the system of sign exchange. Recall Saussure’s observation that linguistic values are ‘defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system’, i.e., that ‘their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not’. In view of this, we may understand that opposition to or non-participation in the system of sign exchange is nigh impossible, by virtue of the fact that such opposition or non-participation is negatively defined by its relationship to the system—such resistance thereby conforms perfectly with the logic of the system, and thus invariably becomes subsumed by the same.22 One would struggle to find a better illustration of this point than Bruce Cockburn’s ‘well-entrenched image as The Guy Who Wants to Avoid an Image’, as mentioned by Steve Burgess in the above-quoted article.23 Accordingly, since many radical commodities are defined negatively by that to which they are opposed, they are, on these grounds alone, drawn into the differential logic of the system of branding.24

It is this inexorable process of subsumption to which Barthes referred when he called attention to the tendency of bourgeois myth to ‘reach everything, corrupt everything, even the very act of refusing oneself to it’. Having examined the effective inevitability of this process of ‘reaching’ and ‘corrupting’, however, the question remains: to what extent does a radical commodity’s complicity in the system of sign exchange compromise its political efficacy?

**In defence of radical commodities**

I shall now begin to focus more closely upon the question of the political efficacy of radical commodities. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter’s *The Rebel Sell* (2005) begs discussion here, particularly insofar as the authors scrutinise a number of cases which are included in the present study—most notably the work of Naomi Klein, Michael Moore, and Kalle Lasn and the Adbusters Media Foundation.25 The book offers a number of keen analyses, and yet, as one reviewer notes, “in places it is also unfair,
light on evidence and repetitively polemical” (Beckett 2005). Needless to say, this is not the place for a review of the book in its entirety; it should be noted, however, that a number of problematic assumptions and generalisations lie at the centre of Heath and Potter’s argument. Moreover, these assumptions and generalisations are, paradoxically, most relevant to the present study, inasmuch as they obscure or preclude the theoretical possibility of an activistic production or consumption of commodities, and thereby inadvertently isolate a number of matters which are of the utmost importance to the question of radical commodities. In other words, although parts of Heath and Potter’s analysis are admittedly useful per se, a number of more important points regarding the political consequence of radical commodities may be elucidated precisely by way of an examination of the shortcomings of their argument.

Firstly, it is necessary to give a brief overview of Heath and Potter’s analysis, and likewise to call attention to those aspects thereof which are valuable in themselves. As intimated, the authors offer, at times, an insightful critique of ‘the counterculture’. They observe that

Books like No Logo, magazines like Adbusters and movies like American Beauty do not undermine consumerism; they reinforce it. This isn’t because the authors, editors or directors are hypocrites. It’s because they’ve failed to understand the true nature of consumer society. They identify consumerism with conformity. As a result, they fail to notice that it is rebellion, not conformity, that has for decades been the driving force of the marketplace. (2005: 101–102)

Recognising that “yesterday’s ‘alternative’ is simply today’s mainstream” (2005: 151), Heath and Potter reach the conclusion that “[r]ebellion is not a threat to the system, it is the system” (2005: 178)—this, of course, is comparable to the argument posited above, namely that the logic of consumption comprises an incorporation of the idea of Revolution itself. It should be pointed out that, in formulating such an analysis, Heath and Potter owe a substantial theoretical debt to Veblen. Veblen’s influence is particularly evident in their assertion that

[most people] spend their money on goods that confer distinction. People buy what makes them feel superior, whether by showing that they are cooler (Nike shoes), better connected (Cuban cigars), better informed (single-malt Scotch), more discerning (Starbucks espresso), morally superior (Body Shop cosmetics) or just plain richer (Louis Vuitton bags). (Heath and Potter 2005: 106)

On the basis of the assumption that the capitalist system is characterised by constant renewal, a renewal which is fuelled by a relentless quest for distinction on the part of consumers, Heath and Potter dispute, or rather deny, the political efficacy of ‘the counterculture’. Rather than challenge the system, they argue, the counterculture merely fuels it, insofar as countercultural ideas and activity provide it with fresh material. They contend that “[i]n a society that prizes individualism and despises

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26 It should also be pointed out, in turn, that this theoretical debt is explicitly acknowledged by the authors.
conformity, being ‘a rebel’ becomes the new aspirational category” (2005: 130). Thus, “[m]ost of the measures that are popularly promoted as ‘anticonsumerist’ are useless. Often they have the exact opposite effect, promoting competitive consumption” (Heath and Potter 2005: 155). Or, in other words, “it’s the nonconformists, not the conformists, who are driving consumer spending. This observation is one that anyone working in advertising will find crushingly obvious. Brand identity is all about product differentiation; it’s about setting the product apart from others” (Heath and Potter 2005: 106).

Furthermore, in the view of Heath and Potter, not only does the counterculture ‘fail to notice’ that it is in fact invigorating the system which it means to oppose, but so too is its conception of progressive change fundamentally misguided. Specifically, as Heath and Potter understand it, the countercultural analysis views all forms of organisation as repressive, and thus it dissolves the distinction between dissent and deviance. They argue that

it is important to draw a distinction between acts of rebellion that challenge senseless or outdated conventions and those that violate legitimate social norms. We must distinguish, in other words, between dissent and deviance. Dissent is like civil disobedience. It occurs when people are willing in principle to play by the rules but have a genuine, good-faith objection to the specific content of the prevailing set of rules. They disobey despite the consequences that these actions may incur. Deviance, on the other hand, occurs when people disobey the rules for self-interested reasons. (2005: 82–83)

With regard to the distinction between deviance and dissent, Heath and Potter additionally posit that

There is one very simple test that we can apply in order to tell the two apart. It may sound old-fashioned, but it is still helpful to ask the simple question, ‘What if everyone did that?—would it make the world a better place to live?’ If the answer is no, then we have grounds to be suspicious. (Heath and Potter 2005: 84)

As intimated, according to Heath and Potter, “the countercultural critique essentially denies the distinction between social deviance and dissent. Since the entire culture is regarded as a system of repression, anyone who breaks any rule, for whatever reason, can claim to be engaging in an act of ‘resistance’” (2005: 141). In other words, the authors understand that the counterculture “began treating all deviance as dissent” (2005: 83). In this way, the counterculture is cast as fundamentally antithetical to a socially progressive politics, since the result of countercultural thinking, “too often, is simply a glamorisation of antisocial behaviour—transgression for the sake of transgression” (Heath and Potter 2005: 98).

In view of the above synopsis of Heath and Potter’s argument, it might be understood that there is a good deal of usefully critical material in The Rebel Sell. Problems, arise, however, from the fact of Heath and Potter’s wanton conflation of ultimately heterogeneous subcultures and social and political movements and ideas,
all under the head of ‘the counterculture’. As one critic of their work observes, “the ‘counter-culture’ framework that the authors rail against is a rather eclectic straw-man, into which they lump everyone from Gramsci to environmentalists, Naomi Klein and Malcolm X’ (O’Keefe 2005). Whilst the suggestion of some element of commonality among such diverse players is not problematic in itself, the weight that Heath and Potter lend to this generalisation ultimately serves not to illuminate the way forward for radical political practice, but rather to obscure a great many possibilities in this area.

Stepping back for a moment, it should be noted that Heath and Potter’s case against the counterculture is based largely upon their argument that countercultural analyses “make it seem as though ‘the system’ in its entirety is responsible for all [of society’s] problems, and so no solution that falls short of a complete overthrow of the system could hope to resolve them. This in turn makes solutions to a number of very tractable social problems seem completely out of reach” (2005: 329). On these grounds, the authors denounce the progressive political utility of the counterculture’s methods and objectives both, and expound instead the virtues of market liberalisation through legislative change. Now, there may indeed be some validity to this argument, but only if one is to accept the authors’ very narrow definition of ‘the counterculture’. Furthermore, much of the misguided reasoning that proceeds from this generalisation of the counterculture can be traced back to the fact that, for Heath and Potter, the ‘competitive consumption’ analysis—derived from Veblen’s work—becomes effectively all-encompassing. That is to say, the authors place a near-total emphasis upon the sign-value of oppositional objects and ideas. For example, with regard to the question of apparently ethical or radical commodities, Heath and Potter present what is in many ways a most insightful argument—i.e., they rightly point out that oppositional themes are readily incorporated into the dominant culture by way of their subjection to the logic of competitive consumption, and that such themes in fact foster competitive consumption—and yet this line of reasoning becomes, for them, totalising. Their perspective casts ethical or radical (‘countercultural’) commodities solely as objects of invidious distinction. Thus, although Heath and Potter argue that the countercultural critique causes its proponents to overlook a number of perfectly serviceable solutions to various social problems—i.e., that “small, workable proposals are consistently ignored in favour of cultural politics, world revolution and other more glamorous pursuits” (2005: 224)—they, in turn, fail to recognise those worthwhile developments which might be realised by way of the sphere of commodities. This oversight is particularly apparent with regard to the critically educative potential of commodities. As mentioned, with regard to the pursuit of progressive social change, Heath and Potter champion legislative change over activistic consumption and production practices, discounting the latter as invariably competitive, and thus contrary to the interests of society as a whole. In so doing, however, they fail to recognise that the consuming public is also the voting public, and thus that ideas disseminated by way of consumer goods stand to have effects outside of the realm of
consumption. Certain members of the movie-going public, for example, may well go to see the latest Michael Moore film because they wish to distinguish themselves from their relatively plebeian neighbours, who are interested only in the newest Hollywood blockbuster. And yet it is also possible that a previously swinging voter will leave the same Michael Moore film determined to vote for the Opposition at the next election, or even that a former abstainer will leave with an invigorated perspective of the possibilities of electoral politics.

Clearly, Heath and Potter’s blanket omission of the possibility of legitimately radical or critical (or otherwise ‘socially progressive’) communication through commodified means is cause for concern. (And indeed this is somewhat surprising, or rather hypocritical, in view of the fact that their own book is nothing other than a cultural commodity with a political agenda. Moreover, the relatively populist style of The Rebel Sell suggests that the authors may themselves have been trying to appeal to the burgeoning market for accessible social criticism—a field in which No Logo is arguably the prevailing touchstone, a book which they are otherwise quick to censure.) Perhaps more worrying, however, is the authors’ unqualified refutation of the radical capacity of consumer activism. As mentioned, Heath and Potter discount consumer activism in favour of legislative change, since they equate consumer action with a countercultural individualism that, in their view, “simply feeds the flames” (2005: 330) of competitive consumerism. That is to say, their analysis issues from a perspective which, as I have also mentioned, invariably views the consumption of potentially radical or ethical commodities as nothing more than an act of what I have described as ‘moral emulation’. However, in lumping all politically-, ethically- or ecologically-minded consumption in with a so-called counterculturalism that is understood as contrary to the greater good, Heath and Potter overlook the positive and indeed substantive changes that may result from such consumption. Moreover, curiously enough, it might be understood that that ‘very simple test’ which forms the foundation of Heath and Potter’s argument against the counterculture (namely the question ‘what if everyone did that?—would it make the world a better place to live?’) also constitutes the very basis of a case for consumer activism. What if everyone bought fair-trade coffee? What if everyone bought clothes that were sewn under ethical conditions and made from organic fabrics? What if everyone listened to music created by a band that diverted funds away from a multinational record label and into grassroots political organisation? Of course, an activistic consumption can realise its potential only if there exists a correspondingly activistic production. An affirmation of the political efficacy of consumer activism, in other words, cannot be divorced from an affirmation of the political efficacy of radical commodities. Indeed, even if, as discussed above, radical commodities typically appear to be more radical than they actually are, i.e., even if their presentation typically exaggerates their revolutionary reality, the consumption en masse of such commodities must certainly amount to some measure of substantively positive change.
Ironic consumption, culture jamming and the materialisation of radicalism

What emerges from the above discussion of Heath and Potter’s work is a renewed demand for an analysis of the consequence, as regards radical commodities, of the relationship between the material and the significative aspects of the (sign-)object.

We have seen that, inasmuch as they conflate the commodity-form and an ethic of radicalism, radical commodities are richly overdetermined, and are, for this reason, ripe for incorporation into the system of fashion, of sign-value. The consumption of a radical commodity as an invidious sign-value is the corollary of a de Certeauian tactical resistance, or of a Fiskean excorporation; just as any decidedly non-radical commodity can be consumed in accordance with a tactical resistance, so an otherwise radical commodity can be consumed in an emulative fashion. In other words, as Fiske observes, the political orientation of producers has no effect upon the fact that they cannot control the uses to which their products are put:

The producers of texts cannot control either popular discrimination or popular productivity. Popular culture does not take easily to central control, however benevolent. There is a risk involved in allowing excess, for that allows meanings to get out of control: the power of the left is as open to carnivalesque inversions and evasions as is that of the right…. (Fiske 1989: 187)

The consumption of a radical commodity as a fashion accessory, as discussed above, of course constitutes such an inversion or evasion of its meaning. There remains, however, a means by which the seditious consequence of a radical commodity might be insulated from such inversions and evasions; this consists namely in the fact that a radical commodity is not limited to the signification of a progressive politics, since it may also, in some measure, actualise the same.

I have stated that we should examine the consequence of the relationship between the material and the significative aspects of the radical commodity. We might summarise the importance of this relationship by saying that, so long as it remains radical in some material capacity, a radical commodity cannot be wholly incorporated into the system as an invidious sign-value. We might address this question of the relationship between the material and the significative aspects of the commodity by way of an examination of the phenomenon of ‘ironic’ consumption.

In a similar vein, Nietzsche has observed that “the actual causes of a thing’s origin and its eventual uses, the manner of its incorporation into a system of purposes, are worlds apart” (1956: 209). This, he argues, is a process of ‘reinterpretation’, “in the course of which the earlier meaning and purpose are necessarily either obscured or lost” (Nietzsche 1956: 209).
has been cast adrift. Our hypothetical consumer, in other words, persists in wearing Nike because the two options available to her here—wearing Nike or not wearing Nike—are, in her eyes, ultimately equally meaningless. The wearing of Nike shoes, in full knowledge of the accusations against the company, thus becomes a manoeuvre in a post-ethical, semiotic game. What is conspicuously absent from this scenario, however, is an appreciation of the fact that commodities are *sign-objects*, not merely *signs*, however immaterial they might appear, and regardless of the emphasis that is placed upon their significative capacity. It was argued above that we cannot afford to overlook the fact that objects invariably function as signs, but, by the same token, nor can their materiality be ignored. In other words, however postmodern, ironic or post-ethical one’s stance toward the consumption of Nike shoes might be, nothing changes the fact that such consumption expressly—i.e., *pecuniarily*—endorses, and thus directly perpetuates, the company’s (alleged) exploitation of its workers. As Zizek has observed, “even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*” (1989: 33). In sum, even if we understand that an object’s meaning may be severed and distanced from its material history, the latter does not disappear. It is precisely in this way that the pragmatic details of the production of a radical commodity might serve in its defence against inversions or evasions of its meaning at the moment of consumption. Consider The Body Shop’s products, for example: even if, as Heath and Potter claim, people buy The Body Shop’s cosmetics because such consumption makes them feel morally superior, they are still purchasing a product that directly or indirectly supports fair trade, which has been produced in a more environmentally responsible manner than many of its competitors, and which is thus, in the present clime, substantively radical. (This is assuming, of course, that The Body Shop’s products are manufactured with a degree of ethical and ecological rigour at least somewhat proximate to that which is claimed of them—in light of Jon Entine’s arguments, however, such assumptions should not be too readily made (see Entine 2003; 2004).)

The particular importance, as regards radical commodities, of the material details of the thing consumed can also be illustrated by contrasting two different RATM concerts, as well as fans’ responses to the same. Firstly, consider Rich Kane’s account of an encounter with an enthusiastic RATM fan:

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28 It might be noted at this point that such a dehistoricisation of the object is most characteristic of contemporary capitalism. Barthes has stated that “[m]yth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History” (1973: 151). This does not only apply at the ideological level with regard to ideas; rather, a corresponding tendency can be observed at a more tangible level, with regard to individual objects. Save for a tokenistic ‘Made in China’ or ‘Made in Taiwan’, or an emphatic—but sometimes misrepresentative—‘Made in Australia’ or ‘Made in USA’, the material histories of individual objects typically remain unknown to their end-users (and indeed often without complaint from the latter). For the most part, this is a structural consequence of today’s immensely complex systems of production; sometimes, however, it is the product of wilful obfuscation. Regardless, the idea of a supply ‘chain’ is today, more often than not, probably a misnomer; tracing the material history of most consumer goods—locating the individual who sewed your sneakers, for example—is likely nigh on impossible. For this reason, the explicit disclosure of the material history of an object—which is seen to a considerable, if not conclusive, extent in the case of the Blackspot sneaker, and to a lesser extent in the case of Freitag products—is itself of radical significance.
“Ohhh, my god, I loooove Rage. They make me so aggro!” says the quite buzzed, petite Cameron Diaz look-alike who has somehow latched onto me moments before the start of this not-much-of-a-surprise surprise Rage Against The Machine show at LA’s El Rey Theatre. “I’ve been into them ever since the Fuck You I Won’t Do What You Tell Me album,” she continues, the pungent aroma of rum rolling off her every exhale. I don’t correct her error—Rage’s first album was self-titled—because she’s just too much fun to watch.

“How did you get your tickets?” I ask. “This thing sold out in two minutes.”

“Weeell, me and my brother paid a scalper, like, $175 each for our tickets, but it’ll be, like, sooo worth it. It’s for the revolution! They rock!” she exclaims, jabbing the air with a clenched fist.

“Um, wouldn’t it have been better for the revolution to have given all that money to something like the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee or any of the other causes that Rage champion?” I ask.

“…”

“I loooove Rage,” she coos on obliviously. “They are, like, just so friggin’ awesome. And Zack is so cute!” (Kane 1999)

Although the group was dedicated, as has been stated, to promoting and supporting a number of radical political causes and organisations, it would be a considerable stretch of the sociological imagination to contend that attendance at a run-of-the-mill RATM concert would alone have constituted a revolutionary act. Thus, the abovementioned concertgoer’s belief that paying a scalper $175 for a ticket to a RATM gig is ‘for the revolution’ is nothing less than an instance of the consumption/consummation of revolution—Kane similarly recognises this, albeit not in so many words. Had the evening in question been a benefit concert, however, her attendance (or, more specifically, her ticket purchase, scalper’s profit aside) would indeed have constituted, in some measure, a radical act. It is precisely with regard to this latter point that the above anecdote may be contrasted—sharply—with Dan Deluca’s review of the benefit concert held by RATM at the Continental Airlines Arena, in 1999, for the defence of Mumia Abu-Jamal. At this concert, according to Deluca (1999), “Rage Against the Machine’s Jimmy Page powerchords and hectoring editorial raps played less as political rage than as pure fistpounding testosterone for guys pissed off at parents or teachers or girlfriends”. “Plenty of [Mumia Abu-Jamal’s] advocates were handing out flyers,” recounts Deluca, “…[b]ut most of the overwhelmingly white-boy crowd just wanted to rock, and fly their flyers as paper airplanes” (1999). One 19-year-old attendee, Damian Jay (quoted in Deluca 1999), stated: “I’m really into Rage, I don’t care about the cause…. I couldn’t care if he was a serial killer or if he killed a thousand people. I’d still go see the band”. And yet, although he may not have cared about ‘the cause’, Jay’s very presence at that concert resulted in a financial contribution to Abu-Jamal’s Defence Fund. It is in this way that the substantive or material aspects of a radical commodity might insulate its political significance from subversion or defusion at the moment of consumption—in the
example of RATM’s Mumia benefit, the particular redistribution of funds that underlay the sale of the group’s music-commodity indisputably lent that commodity a radical character, in spite of the political ambivalence reportedly demonstrated by much of the audience.

Such materialisations of radicalism, however, are of analytic significance not only by virtue of the fact that they might serve to circumvent a discordant motive at the moment of consumption (irony, emulation, indifference, etc.), but also insofar as they might serve to thwart more strategic varieties of incorporation. I mean to evoke here the de Certeauian notion of strategy, in relation to which we may conceive of strategies of incorporation, i.e., techniques of incorporation that ‘become possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated’. These should be distinguished from the comparatively disorganised and decentred processes of incorporation that may be associated with consumption practices. This point might be best illustrated by way of a comparative analysis of radical commodities en masse and another distinctly contemporary tactic of resistance, namely culture jamming.

We ought to proceed on this course firstly by way of a brief overview of the phenomenon of culture jamming. The theoretical underpinnings of culture jamming are informed heavily, if not entirely, by the Debordian notion that we today live in a ‘society of the spectacle’ (as was discussed in Chapter Three); culture jamming is a mode of resistance borne of and adapted to society understood in this way. In fact, ‘culture jamming’—an expression coined in 1984 by the experimental band Negativland (see Dery 1993)—is, in essence, nothing more than a contemporary term for the Debordian concept of ‘détournement’. According to Debord,

Détournement … is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. … Détournement founds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present. (1994: 146)

The tactic of détournement is, both in intention and in literal translation, a diversion from the spectacle: if the spectacle is understood as an enthralling yet thoroughly ideological monologue, we might perceive of détournement—or culture jamming—as an interruptive and dialogical rebuke. It is a reclamation of space—both mental and physical—for critique and for the expression of oppositional ideas. Accordingly, culture jamming has been described by Tim Jordan as “semiotic terrorism” (2002: 104), and by Mark Dery (1993) as a tactic of “media sabotage” that aims to “invest ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously … decrypt[ing] them, rendering their seductions impotent”. The particular techniques of subversion typically associated with culture jamming include ‘uncommercials’, ‘subvertisements’, graffiti and ‘billboard liberation’. After Barthes, we might understand culture jamming as anti-mythical speech—this is an incursion into the
spectacular system of signs, which means to expose the specious and contingent nature of that which might otherwise be taken as truth.

Whilst radical commodities and culture jamming are largely divergent phenomena, it should be pointed out that they do share something of a commonality in terms of method. Specifically, both modes of resistance engage closely with and indeed depend heavily upon those (dominant) systems and structures which they critique or to which they stand opposed.29 In the case of radical commodities, the commodity-form itself is leveraged to radical effect. Culture jamming, meanwhile, plays upon and subverts the *places* (in the de Certeauian sense) of culturally dominant institutions and entities (principally corporations). (Culture jamming is, in other words, strongly reminiscent of the de Certeauian *tactic*.) Nevertheless, in spite of this similarity, radical commodities and culture jamming ultimately represent very different modes of resistance. The key difference with which we are here concerned lies in the fact that culture jamming is principally a *resistance based in signs*—Jordan’s above-quoted description of culture jamming as ‘semiotic terrorism’ attests to this analysis. We might understand that this emphasis of culture jamming upon the semiotic has negative consequences as regards its radical efficacy, and particularly as regards the sustainability thereof. To be precise, since culture jamming is, for all intents and purposes, an entirely significative mode of resistance, its tactics are highly susceptible to co-optation by advertisers. Perhaps the most notorious example of such co-optation is the case of an Australian advertising campaign, circa March 2001, which promoted a then-new Nike football boot. The campaign’s billboards featured a large image of the new Nike boot and the copy “The most offensive boots we’ve ever made”—a polysemous statement which apparently referred principally to football, whether to the offensive or forward line or to offensive or attacking play, but which alluded also to the multitude of sweatshop-labour allegations that the company faced at the time. These billboards were shortly ‘liberated’ by the FFFF, the ‘Fans Fight for Fairer Football’ group, who were apparently an activist group campaigning not against the corporation’s labour practices but against the ‘unfair’ technological advantage offered by the new Nike boots; the billboard liberations were supported by black-and-white FFFF posters and a website, both of which were conspicuously plebeian in their design, in imitation of the aesthetic of grassroots activist organisations. It was subsequently revealed, however, that the FFFF was in fact a construct, a product of Nike’s advertising agency, and a premeditated component of the campaign. The tactics of culture jamming were thus co-opted as a part of the spectacle; corporate monologue was disguised as participatory dialogue.

29 It should be pointed out that there is a point at which the phenomena of radical commodities and culture jamming observably converge, and indeed one with which we are most familiar, namely the work of the Adbusters Media Foundation. In fact, much of Adbusters’ output could be more readily classified as culture jam than as commodity, and, if culture jamming, its ideas and methods have enjoyed a (relatively) widespread popularity (or notoriety) in more recent years, this might be attributed largely to the work of the Adbusters Media Foundation, and to *Adbusters* magazine in particular. (Yet, further to this, it could also be argued, quite reasonably, that much of the Media Foundation’s work itself constitutes a commodification of culture jamming.)
In the example of the FFFF campaign, the tactical language of culture jamming was incorporated into the system as a spectacular manner of speech: a tactic that means to tear corporate images from the sanctity of their internal logic was reduced to a game of self-effacing parody. Of course, the FFFF campaign did not spell the end of culture jamming, but it nevertheless constituted, in some measure, a diffusion/defusion thereof.\(^3\) Moreover, the FFFF campaign exemplified the ease with which the system of advertising might accommodate—i.e., incorporate—a principally semiotic tactic of resistance, irrespective of the depth of its theoretical foundation. In contrast, we might understand that radical commodities do not stand to be defused so easily, since, as has been pointed out, these are objects which also materialise, to varying degrees, a radical politics.\(^3\) On this note, it might be pointed out, once again, that it is this capacity of radical (or ‘countercultural’) commodities to actualise or facilitate substantive political action which Heath and Potter overlook in The Rebel Sell. Specifically, their book opens with the following statement, which is most pertinent here:

\(^3\) In other words, whilst the FFFF campaign did not spell the end of culture jamming, we might understand that the explosion in the popularity of ‘guerrilla’ and ‘viral’ marketing techniques—particularly the use of stickers, aerosol stencils, other commissioned graffiti and comparable street-based methods of communication to promote a product or brand—have at least weakened the political connotations of otherwise distinctly tactical media. In this way, contrary to Marshall McLuhan’s famous aphorism (see McLuhan and Fiore 1967), the medium (or rather, in this case, the technique, specifically graffiti, billboard defacement, etc.) no longer guarantees a seditionist message. Thus, if the imitation of the tactical language of culture jamming stands to have profoundly disastrous effects upon the potency of this form of resistance, this is not only because culture jamming holds little recourse outside of the realm of signification, but also because its interventionist techniques are not innately seditious. In sum, culture jamming is too heavily dependent upon a particular style of resistance, and, as Hebdige has explicited with regard to punk, and as has been subsequently born out by our discussion of the logic of the system of fashion, style constitutes a most unstable foundation for a tactic of resistance.

\(^3\) In fact, so far as radical commodities are concerned, one is rather hard-pressed to isolate instances of strategic incorporation comparable to Nike’s co-option of culture jamming. Hebdige’s notion of the commodity form of incorporation, which could be understood as strategic, does not apply here per se, since radical commodities are, obviously enough, already commodified. Two phenomena that we have already examined might retrospectively be understood as strategic, specifically censorship (see ‘The manifest paradox’, in Chapter Seven) and attempts at depoliticisation (notably Random House’s ‘The political is also a personal’ advertisement for No Logo, discussed above)—these number among types of conduct that might be understood as sabotage on the part of those apparently conservative corporate interests who paradoxically publish radical commodities (also exemplary of such sabotage is the publication by HarperCollins of David T Hardy and Jason Clarke’s Michael Moore is a Big Fat Stupid White Man (2004), in spite of the fact that the company also publishes Moore’s own work). Of course, the example of Nike’s co-option of the tactical language of culture jamming poses the question of imitation, which indeed represents a threat to the political efficacy of radical commodities, and yet, in this regard, their materialisation of radicalism once more stands them in good stead. Rage Against The Machine, for example, spurned many stylistic imitators, but few of these mimics have produced anything resembling the group’s political message, and even fewer have been so consistently able to link their music-commodities with substantive political action. The band did not simply name-drop fashionably radical political causes in its songs; rather, it provided detailed information about relatively obscure causes and organisations, as well as contact details for the latter, in its videos and in the liner notes of its albums. Furthermore, as was discussed above, the group raised funds for such organisations, whilst the individual group members also volunteered their time to aid the same. For example, according to the reportage of Michael Simmons (1999), Zack de la Rocha “made his fourth trip this past June to Chiapas to meet with impoverished Indians, coorganized Highland Park’s Popular Resource Center, which serves low-income community needs, and co-produced the Spitfire spoken-word tour”. Indeed, following the release of Evil Empire, the group’s second album, it was reported that “Sony had to send representatives to Chiapas to convince [de la Rocha] to leave the Zapatistas and make another record” (Ganahl 1997). In a similar demonstration of commitment, Tom Morello was arrested during a protest against the Guess jeanswear company and its (alleged) use of sweatshop labour (see Sprague 1997). In sum, whilst the initial distinctiveness of RATM’s ‘sound’ might have been diluted, in some measure, by a flood of new bands fusing rap and rock (a style which RATM helped to pioneer), the group’s political currency was not thereby undermined.
September 2003 marked a turning point in the development of Western civilisation. It was the month that *Adbusters* magazine started accepting orders for the Black Spot Sneaker, its own signature brand of ‘subversive’ running shoes. After that day, no rational person could possibly believe that there is any tension between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ culture. After that day, it became obvious to everyone that cultural rebellion, of the type epitomised by *Adbusters* magazine, is not a threat to the system—it is the system. (Heath and Potter 2005: 3)

Whilst *Adbusters* magazine might indeed advocate or even epitomise ‘cultural rebellion’, it would be a mistake to assume that the advocacy of such rebellion constitutes the extent of the organisation’s political position. That is to say, it is certainly true that *Adbusters* magazine, like the balance of the Media Foundation’s oeuvre, delivers a critique of the spectacular society, but this is not merely a critique of the spectacle *per se*; rather, it is at once a critique of the spectacle itself and a critique of the material conditions and relations that are both engendered and obscured by the spectacle. For this reason, the release of the Blackspot sneaker does indeed constitute a ‘turning point’, but this is a turning point in terms of the strategic direction of the Media Foundation, and not—as Heath and Potter would aggrandise—in the ‘development of Western civilisation’. Criticism of the labour practices of multinational footwear brands, and the jamming or détournement of their advertisements, is of questionable utility in the absence of a less detestable alternative to the products of such companies; with the release of the Black Spot sneaker, however, Adbusters has moved beyond mere criticism and has delivered a radical, material alternative to the status quo.  

### Reassessing the question of incorporation

In this chapter, we have contemplated the various ways in which the political cruces of radical commodities stand to become incorporated into the dominant order, or otherwise ‘defused’. We have recognised the extent to which the complicity of these objects in the commodity system entails their inevitable subjection to the logic of branding and their enmeshment in a culture of competitive consumption. Yet, we have also considered the ways in which a substantively radical practice might serve to insulate, in some measure, the political significance of these objects, in spite of such problematics. With regard to this latter point, we might come to fundamentally reassess our understanding of incorporation.

From our initial discussions of Marx’s work, and onward, we have charted what is effectively the transformation of the commodity-form. Lukács’s notion of reification—his description of the internalisation of the logic of the

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It must be pointed out, however, that, whilst Heath and Potter erroneously focus exclusively on the sign-value of the Blackspot sneaker, thus ignoring the radical significance of the product’s material qualities, Kalle Lasn unwittingly vindicates their critique. Apparently not content with providing an ethical alternative to Nike sneakers, Lasn states that the Blackspot sneaker was borne of a decision “to out-cool [Phil Knight, CEO of Nike], get into the business and cut into his market share” (quoted in Arevalo 2005, my emphasis). In this way, the Blackspot sneaker is explicitly drawn into the system of ‘cool’, of cultural emulation, and the debate around the same. And, on these grounds, the Blackspot sneaker is, as Heath and Potter recognise, perfectly consistent with the prevailing logic of the system of objects.
commodity—constitutes a decisive analytic moment; we have witnessed, often through the eyes of Baudrillard, the expansion and the intensification of the commodity-form by way of processes that are, in essence, described by Lukács’s concept of reification. We have seen that, in the present day, there is effectively no human faculty, emotion or quality which is sheltered from the possibility of subjection to economic logic. Of course, on a rather more empirical or vulgarly political level, we have also examined the phenomenon of incorporation, which is, in fact, frequently synonymous with that of commodification, as attested to by Hebdige’s assertion that ‘the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the ‘real’/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form’. All of this must, however, be understood in the context of what has been said in earlier chapters, particularly Chapter Six, with regard to the possible scope of a radical politics. That is to say, the questions of incorporation and of the implication of the structure of the commodity-form must be understood in relation to what has been said regarding the antagonism of the social and the impossibility of Revolution.

If, as we have seen, the idea of Revolution is itself a myth, the matter of incorporation necessarily becomes cast in a rather different light. Specifically, in view of our assumption of the impossibility of Revolution, it may be understood that incorporation is itself distinctly mythical in character. This proposition may, at first, seem amiss, since it would appear to be inconsistent with that which has previously been said regarding myth. Our earlier discussions of myth, however, were principally concerned with those of the bourgeois variety; in contrast, it is in the ideology of the Left that the idea of incorporation has the function of a myth. It is a counterpart to the idea of Revolution: it describes a frustration of the Revolutionary struggle, but, in so doing, it crystallises the idea of that struggle—in this way, it is consistent with Barthes’s observation that ‘the very end of myths is to immobilize the world’, for the reciprocal effect of the notion of incorporation is a crystallisation of the possibility of Revolution. Of course, if it is understood that the Revolution is ultimately impossible, so too is the conventional conception of incorporation itself fundamentally destabilised. Thus, whilst an analysis of the processes of incorporation may certainly be useful, we should be wary of the negative qualities that are typically ascribed to such processes, for such an assessment would seem to have a most tenuous foundation. Moreover, as will presently be shown, such an ascription might in fact have a politically debilitating effect.

Having renounced the possibility of Revolution—or, rather, having recognised the impossibility thereof—our concern must, after Laclau and Mouffe, turn to small,

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53 Whilst my aforementioned criticisms of their fundamental argument still stand, Heath and Potter, to their credit, recognise the mythical character of incorporation. As discussed above, they hold the position that “countercultural rebellion has become one of the major forces driving competitive consumption” (Heath and Potter 2005: 131); “in order to preserve the ideology that sustains this consumption,” they continue, “it is essential that the mass-marketing of rebellion be described as ‘co-optation’. In this way, the perpetual cycles of obsolescence can be blamed upon the system rather than seen as a consequence of competition for a positional good. The myth of co-optation thus serves to conceal the fact that ‘alternative’ is, and always has been, good business” (Heath and Potter 2005: 131).
contingent revolutions, i.e., to actions that are, if not symbolic (in the Baudrillardian sense of the symbolic as a radical otherness), at least substantively progressive. Following this, it might be understood that many of the various processes which are typically understood as incorporative may in fact constitute valid and indeed most valuable channels for the realisation of progressive change. That is to say, by way of its ‘incorporation’ into the dominant order, a marginal politics or ethic, or a set of otherwise unconventional values or practices, might feed back into and thus effect change in dominant cultural or ideological systems. Such a possibility is the corollary of the apparently relentless forward march of the commodity-form. Debord has stated that “the commodity’s becoming worldly coincides with the world’s being transformed into commodities” (1994: 43)—we have examined, at considerable length, the apparently adverse implications of ‘the world’s being transformed into commodities’ (such as is described by the idea of the ‘liberation’ of productive forces), yet, as attested to by Debord’s assertion, this is a bipartite process of transformation, and we have not duly acknowledged the political potential which is implicit in the reciprocal character of such developments. That is to say, whilst ever more aspects of humanity and society seemingly become subject to the logic of the commodity, we might understand that, by way of the process of incorporation, the system is itself reciprocally and correspondingly altered. Such an analysis is succinctly expressed by Fiske, who observes that

> Incorporation always involves giving up some ground, the concession of space; such a continued erosive process may well provide changes in the system that allow significant improvements in the condition of the subordinate. The redistribution of power and resources within the system may not be radical, but it may alter the way that power is exercised and the nature of power itself. (1989: 193)

Thus, whilst we might bemoan the commodification of almost everything, i.e., the fact that even such foundations of the social as morality itself may become subject to the logic of the commodity, it should be recognised that ‘incorporation’ is perhaps not so unilateral or thoroughly disagreeable a process as has been traditionally understood.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that the material aspects of radical commodities are of critical importance, for it is through the *materialisation of a radical politics* that these commodities might resist incorporation into the dominant order, i.e., the defusion of their political content. In sum, however, it is my contention that those processes which have conventionally been understood as ‘incorporation’ might in fact be leveraged, by way of radical commodities, to radical political effect. Since the

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34 In a similar vein, de Certeau observes that “[t]he language produced by a certain social category has the power to extend its conquests into vast areas surrounding it, ‘deserts’ where nothing equally articulated seems to exist, but in doing so it is caught in the trap of its assimilation by a jungle of procedures rendered invisible to the conqueror by the very victories he seems to have won” (1984: 32).
Revolution, like Society, cannot ever be attained, that ostensibly pure radicalism which would be lost by way of incorporation constitutes useless baggage—and radical commodities are, at any rate, already internal to the commodity system, which, as we have seen, represents the principal mechanism of incorporation. Thus, it is precisely by way of their ‘incorporation’ that radical commodities might effect substantive change.
In a moment of exceptional insight—but also, perhaps, of unparalleled understatement—Marx described the commodity as ‘a very strange thing’. It is only now, however, that we may appreciate the true extent of this strangeness. As Zizek (1989: 16) has observed, “it is as if the dialectics of the commodity-form presents us with a pure—distilled, so to speak—version of a mechanism offering us a key to the theoretical understanding of phenomena which, at first sight, have nothing whatsoever to do with the field of political economy…. In the commodity-form there is definitely more at stake than the commodity-form itself”. Indeed, we have seen that the structure of the commodity is mirrored by that of the sign (or vice versa), and that the manipulation of this structure represents a most elementary political operation. Accordingly, it might be understood that a rigorous analysis of the commodity should not be divorced from an analysis of relations of power under any circumstances, and yet it is nevertheless the case that the problem of the commodity is made more complex again by its explicit conflation with the question of radicalism, such as is necessitated by the analysis of the phenomenon of radical commodities.

There is no need to explain again the paradox of radical commodities, but I should reiterate that the problem of the radical commodity is principally a structural one. That is to say, to paraphrase Lukács, there is no inconsistency observable among radical commodities that does not ultimately lead back to the question of the commodity-structure. Consider, for example, RATM’s affiliation with Sony, Michael Moore’s considerable income, the Blackspot ‘anti-brand’, or Anita Roddick’s conception of The Body Shop as a ‘force for social change’—the contradiction which inheres in each of these examples issues from the idea that the commodity-form is essentially exploitative. For this reason, Marx’s seminal work on the commodity at once represents a necessary point of departure and a substantial hurdle, for the Marxian analysis of the commodity embodies, as we have seen, a problematic in relation to which the imagining of a radical or progressive politics falters. This problematic is namely the necessity, in Marx’s view, of a ‘global solution-revolution’ (to use the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe). This is a presumption which effectively emasculates the radical imaginary today.

This complication would appear to be addressed, in some measure, by Veblen’s recognition of the significance of the consumption of commodity-objects, for it initially appears that the problematic of the commodity-structure might be circumvented by way of an appeal to the sphere of consumption. Moreover, Veblen’s work also admits the possibility of a non-invidious commodity, which clearly anticipates the possibility of a radical commodity. As Baudrillard has revealed, however, the significatory capacity of commodity-objects is in no way independent of the exploitative character of the commodity-form; rather the opposite is true.
Ultimately, paradoxically, we might understand that the Marxian problematic of the commodity-structure may be addressed by way of an extension of the Marxian dialectic itself. Baudrillard has shown not only that use-value is not devoid of fetishism, but that use-value is in fact that term of the commodity-structure in which fetishism is most strongly in force. In this way, ideology is seen to permeate the commodity-structure in its entirety; any ostensibly irreducible quality therein which would serve as the point of reference for a global solution to the problem of capital is thus banished to the realm of impossibility. Whether at the level of international politics or at that of the structure of exchange, the fundamentally antagonistic character of the social makes itself known in the form of symptoms which prevent the realisation of Society. As Zizek has observed, the Marxian conception of a utopian socialism “conveys a belief in the possibility of a universality without its symptom, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation” (Zizek 1989: 22–23).

Of course, in itself, a refutation of the possibility of a ‘global solution-revolution’ serves only to further complicate the question of a radical politics. Baudrillard’s extension of the Marxian dialectic remains significant, and yet it introduces new problems here. Specifically, Baudrillard has revealed a parity between the structure of the commodity and that of the sign; the extension of this analysis—manifest in the concept of ‘simulation’—implies that truth itself is effectively an artefact of the structure of the sign. As Rojek and Turner (1993: xi) observe, Baudrillard’s “definition of culture as ‘the collective sharing of simulacra’ reduces truth and reality to a language game”. The very idea of a radical politics is thus thrown into disarray. Baudrillard’s analysis falls short, however, insofar as he fails to duly recognise that that structure which is fundamental to the era of simulation is distinct from the articulation therein of particular simulacra. As a result, he unhelpfully accords an unqualified agency to ‘the system’ itself. In contrast, in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, and, in particular, in their conception of hegemony, we find an understanding of politics which acknowledges the contingency of truth, yet which holds that truths are established by way of discursive articulation (and are thus not wholly products of the system itself). It is for this reason that I have argued that the notion of hegemony proffered by Laclau and Mouffe constitutes a useful explication the nature of the political in the era of simulation; moreover, their work accordingly avoids the problematic which inheres in Baudrillard’s line of reasoning.

The notion of hegemony proffered by Laclau and Mouffe is of considerable importance as regards the problem of radical commodities—indeed, for two reasons. Firstly, it is admitting of the world of commodities as a ‘possible sphere of struggle’; secondly, the radical proposal which corresponds to this conception of the political as hegemonic, namely the challenge issued by Laclau and Mouffe for projects which advance a ‘radical and plural democracy’, allows us to acknowledge the political significance of the specific projects embodied in radical commodities. We thus may appreciate the political significance of RATM’s communication of the plight of
political minorities, Michael Moore’s critique of corporate conduct and the American political system, Naomi Klein’s analysis of a brand-centric globalisation, The Body Shop’s advocacy of corporate social responsibility, Freitag’s actualisation of an ethic of re-use in manufacturing practices, and the Adbusters model, in the Blackspot ‘anti-corporation’, of “a more grassroots kind of capitalism that will improve people’s lives” (Lasn, quoted in Arevalo 2005). Needless to say, it would be unrealistic to assume that any of these examples might be of momentous political consequence, and yet it might nevertheless be understood that each, in its own way, contributes to the amelioration of a particular social problem.

The concept of hegemony proffered by Laclau and Mouffe is also significant on account of the fact that it represents, in some measure, a negotiation of the critical analysis (in the Marxist tradition) of the commodity-form, and the analysis of commodity-objects in use. As Michel de Certeau has argued,

A distinction is required other than the one that distributes behaviors according to their place (of work or leisure) and qualifies them thus by the fact that they are located on one or another square of the social checkerboard—in the office, in the workshop, or at the movies. There are differences of another type. They refer to the modalities of action, to the formalities of practices. (de Certeau 1984: 29)

Likewise, an object should be assessed not only in its capacity as a commodity; other types of distinction must remain possible. Thus, to be precise, an understanding of the political as hegemonic allows us to recognise, after de Certeau, that there may be more to a commodity than its status as such, and yet the notion of hegemony propounded by Laclau and Mouffe also preserves that valuable perspective of the commodity-structure which emerges from the critical, Marxist tradition. As I have stated, however, we should be wary of the emphasis that is placed on the pursuit of radical democracy a political project, for it stands to obscure other political questions. In other words, an ability to recognise one form of politics (the politics of the sphere of commodities) should not come at the expense of an ability to recognise others (the political questions of class, of the state, of governance, of globalisation, etc.).

With regard to the means by which radical commodities might effect change, I have argued that it is necessary to reconceptualise those processes which have typically been understood, in relation to subcultural or otherwise marginal projects and ideas, as ‘incorporation’. This is especially true in relation to the substantive qualities of many radical commodities, such as, for example, an ethic of responsible manufacturing: the diffusion thereof should be understood not as a defusion of their radical significance, but rather as a moment of success. For example, although the spate of Body Shop imitators is detrimental to the company’s competitive advantage in the marketplace, such emulation constitutes, in relation to its purported values, a victory, insofar as such imitation should equate to a net increase in ethically- and ecologically-minded manufacturing. This notion of the reclamation of the processes of incorporation brings to the fore the tactical character of radical commodities. Tom
Morello once described Rage Against The Machine as a “Trojan horse” (Morello, quoted in Holthouse 1996); I can think of no analogy which better captures the essential character of radical commodities in general. The production of such commodities is undoubtedly akin to la perruque on an expanded scale. Indeed, there is one tactic which is common to all of the cases discussed here, namely an *excorporation* of the channels opened by global commerce, that is, an appropriation of institutions and media typically reserved for the global pursuit of capital. (This observation is, however, most applicable to Michael Moore, Naomi Klein and RATM, by virtue of the reliance of each upon the infrastructure of their respective publishers.)

In sum, it is my contention that the sphere of commodities should be admitted as a possible site for the implementation of projects which advance a radical politics, and thus that radical commodities should be understood as a legitimate vehicle for social and political critique. Moreover, I would argue that such an estimation is *necessary*, not only on account of the questionable foundation of any politics which would advocate a global solution to the problems of the social (as Zizek has observed, such solutions are ‘a direct path to totalitarianism’), but also because of the contemporary ubiquity of the commodity-form. That is to say, since almost all channels of communication are today commodified, we cannot afford to discount the possibility of political action by commodified means—as has been said of *No Logo*, for example, there is ‘no sense being an anti-corporate-branding tree falling in a lonely forest’. Indeed, as I have argued, it might be understood that the radical and apparently relentless growth of the commodity-form, which has resulted in its contemporary ubiquity, not only necessitates but also *facilitates* the radical commodity, insofar as the incorporation of *quality* into the commodity-form—which is manifest principally in the institution of branding—exacerbates the overdetermination of the object, and so permits ulterior values, including those of the radical variety, within the gamut of the commodity.

In concluding, however, I must reiterate that no assumptions should be made about the political efficacy of radical commodities, neither as a whole, nor with regard to particular cases. That is to say, whilst I have made the claim that the apparently injurious tendencies of the commodity-structure do not necessarily preclude the expression or actualisation of an alternative politics through commodity-objects, it should be emphasised that there is no means by which we might predict the ‘progressiveness’ of different radical commodities.¹ The plurality of consumption means that the radical character of apparently radical commodities remains anything but certain. Just as a decidedly non-radical commodity might be repurposed by a

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¹ Fiske (1989: 189) makes an observation which is most pertinent here (particularly if ‘text’ is read as ‘commodity-object’):

“[e]valuating the potential progressiveness of popular culture is beyond us at the present state of our understanding, and may well remain so. … Textual analysis may be able to identify a text’s popular potential, but it can only speculate about if or how this potential will be actualized. The speculations can be conducted with some theoretical rigor, for they must be situated within both appropriate textual theory and appropriate social theory, but they can never pass beyond the illustrative, they can never be exhaustive, for they will always be taken by surprise by some of the practical, contextual uses to which the text will be put. Similarly, it is impossible to predict which of these uses will be more or less progressive than any other”.

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consumer to seditious ends, so there is no guarantee that a radical commodity will be consumed as such.
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