

Marx and Manatheism

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They were given the choice to become kings or messengers. Just like children they all chose to be messengers. For this reason, there are only messengers; they race through the world and, because there are no kings, they cry out to one another announcements that have become meaningless. They would happily put an end to their miserable life but because of their oath of office they don't dare. (Kafka 1992, pp. 235–36; my translation)

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*. A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (DeLillo 1984, p. 155)

I

Among the most quoted texts in the literature of anthropology is no doubt Claude Lévi-Strauss' short *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, first published in 1950. The passages that continue to exercise an enormous force of attraction on readers are those pertaining to the notion of *mana*, a concept—or, as Lévi-Strauss calls it, a *signifier*—that itself functions as a name for just such forces of attraction in the “primitive” cultures analyzed by Mauss as well as by his uncle, Émile Durkheim. Lévi-Strauss famously argued that *mana* functions in the way his two predecessors claimed above all *in their own writings*: “So we can see that in one case, at least, the notion of *mana* does present those characteristics of a secret power, a mysterious force, which Durkheim and Mauss attributed to it: for such is the role it plays in their own system. *Mana* really is *mana* there.”¹ Lévi-Strauss' attempt to critique and, ultimately, disenchant the concept by analyzing it as a linguistic phenomenon, i.e., as the name for a structural feature of all human languages that comes to be hypostasized, treated as a substantial reality, has, it would seem, itself absorbed a remnant of the force it was meant to dissolve. The work of disenchantment can, it would seem, exercise its own considerable charms.

¹ Lévi-Strauss 1987, p. 57. The term *mana* was introduced to Europe by the missionary and ethnologist, Robert Codrington who, in one attempt at a definition writes, “The Melanesian mind is entirely possessed by the belief in a supernatural power or influence, called almost universally *mana*. This is what works to effect everything which is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature; it is present in the atmosphere of life, attaches itself to persons or things, and is manifested by results which can only be ascribed to its operation” (Codrington 1891, pp. 118–19). In his *General Theory of Magic*, Mauss puts it this way: “This extraneous substance is invisible, marvelous, spiritual—in fact, it is the spirit which contains all efficacy and all life [...]. It is only supernatural ‘*in a way*,’ that is to say, that *mana* is both supernatural and natural, since it is spread throughout the tangible world where it is *both heterogeneous and ever immanent*” (Mauss 2001, p. 13). In his cultural history of the concept of the fetish, Hartmut Böhme makes the same claim with respect to Marx's use of that notion. See Böhme 2014.

Lévi-Strauss' account of the emergence and persistence of notions like *mana* is essentially an anthropogenic one, itself structured around a conceptual impasse or aporia. Becoming human, which for Lévi-Strauss means becoming a speaking being, a creature endowed with language *qua* symbolic system, implies a gap or missing link in the diachronic dimension of its occurrence, one indexed by a synchronic discordance in the communicative flow within that system. "Notions of the *mana* type," as Lévi-Strauss refers to them, are meant to master or bind that discordance and thereby facilitate further communicative intercourse and exchange. To recall Lévi-Strauss' abbreviated version of the anthropogenic story:

Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually. In the wake of a transformation which is not a subject of study for the social sciences, but for biology and psychology, a shift occurred from a stage when nothing had meaning to another stage when everything had meaning. Actually, that apparently banal remark is important, because that radical change has no counterpart in the field of knowledge, which develops slowly and progressively. In other words, at the moment when the entire universe all at once became *significant*, it was none the better *known* for being so, even if it is true that the emergence of language must have hastened the rhythm of the development of knowledge. So there is a fundamental opposition, in the history of the human mind, between symbolism, which is characteristically discontinuous, and knowledge, characterized by continuity. (Lévi-Strauss 1987, pp. 59–60)

This opposition results in what Lévi-Strauss goes on to describe as a kind of chronic economic crisis pertaining to the supply and demand of efficacious signifiers, a crisis only apparently resolvable by way of a *deus ex machina*,

Namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified,

given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or “inadequation” between the two, a non-fit and overflow which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man’s efforts to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification (which he shares out among things in accordance with the laws of the symbolic thinking which it is the task of ethnologists and linguists to study). That distribution of a supplementary ration [...] is absolutely necessary to ensure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking. (Lévi-Strauss 1987, p. 63)

As already indicated, notions like *mana* function as a kind of general equivalent for this surplus—Lévi-Strauss variously characterized it as a *floating signifier* (ibid., 63), a “symbol in its pure state” (ibid., 64), and a “zero symbolic value” (ibid.)—that serves as a relay or transfer point for its distribution and circulation. And as Lévi-Strauss further adds, notions of the *mana* type stand “surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention” (ibid., 63). So, strange as it may seem, a certain *poetic excess* would appear to be what allows social mediation to get a grip—I would say, a libidinal grip—on the imagination of embodied subjects.²

It’s worth underlining a fundamental ambiguity with respect to the notions of *surplus* and *excess*. As already noted, the

² In a recent book, Slavoj Žižek explicitly cites Lévi-Strauss’ discussion of *mana* as the background for his understanding of what he finds missing in recent discussions of Hegel (most importantly those of Robert Brandom and Robert Pippin), namely a notion of the *immediacy of mediation*. Here as elsewhere in Žižek’s work, one sees just how much the Lacanian tradition owes to Lévi-Strauss’s account of *mana*: “If the identity of a signifier is nothing but the series of its constitutive differences, then every signifying series has to be supplemented—‘sutured’—by a reflexive signifier which has no determinate meaning (signified), since it stands only for the presence of meaning as such (as opposed to its absence).” It is, as Žižek repeats an oft-used formulation, what “gives body to difference as such” (Žižek 2016, pp. 93, 95).

“signifier-surfeit” that notions like *mana* serve to bind and relay is correlated to a gap in the chain of knowledge, or perhaps better, to a knowledge that cannot be known but only, if I might put it that way, *excessively signified*. *Mana* holds the place of *something missing* in the space of reasons, the space of possible knowledge of the world. In Lévi-Strauss’ anthropogenic terms, we come into the world endowed with a distinctive sort of inadequacy, *with* something forever *withheld* from our comprehension yet insisting in our lives as a nodal point of what Raymond Williams called structures of feeling.³ To put it in somewhat paradoxical terms, we come into the world endowed with, we might even say, invested with, a *surplus scarcity* that every form of life must cope with, or better: find a way to *manage*, with special emphasis on the first four letters of the word. To bring Sigmund Freud and Lévi-Strauss together—something that, of course, Jacques Lacan claimed to have done in his account of the phallus *qua* signifier of castration—there is a “signifier-surfeit” because something has always already gone missing from the space of meaning which leaves, which *adds* to life, the remnant of a void that is in a peculiar sense “less” than the nothing of a loss or absence; the surplus of signifying stress that gets relayed by way of enigmatic signifiers “of the *mana* type” is the mode of being of an impossible knowledge of which we can only ever be *unconscious*.

II

I hope that it is clear from Lévi-Strauss’ analysis that for Mauss, Durkheim, and other researchers working in what William Mazzarella (2017) has called the “*mana* moment” of the European social sciences, *mana* functions much in the way that *value* (along

³ For a survey of the various uses of the term in Williams’ work, see Matthews 2001.

with its general equivalent, money) does for Marx in his analysis of the commodity form. One will recall that Marx characterized value as a social substance and, indeed, as an occult and spectral one, a *gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit* extracted/abstracted from the bodies of workers and transferred to objects as a surplus value in excess of any use value.⁴ Marx's *political* economic point was, of course, that in modern capitalist societies lives are governed by, subject to the demands and commands of, this marvelous surplus and its immanent drive to self-appreciation, to what might be called its "autodoxological" tendency (doxologies are, one will recall, liturgical hymns in praise of God). I introduce that notion as a placeholder for a larger argument that would link Marx's understanding of the self-valorization of Value—the true motor of capitalist economies—to Max Weber's understanding of the spirit of capitalism as emerging out of the ostensibly Protestant compulsion to work solely and unceasingly for the greater glory of God, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. One might indeed argue that Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism prepared the way for these later anthropological investigations of *mana*. Or rather, that the "scientific" preoccupation with *mana* (along with fetishism, totemism, etc.) is itself a displaced way of engaging with the facts of a life *ever more governed by the spectral materiality of value*.

If capitalism, as Walter Benjamin has argued in an effort to radicalize Weber's thesis, is to be grasped as a religion and indeed, one that is practiced 24/7, we should, I am suggesting, characterize it as a *manatheistic* one. As Benjamin put it, in capitalism, "there are no 'weekdays.' There is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshiper."⁵ Marx's labor

⁴ See Marx 2008, p. 52, and 1977, p. 128. There Fowkes translates the term as "phantom-like objectivity."

⁵ Benjamin 1996, p. 288. The fragment was translated by Rodney Livingstone.

theory of value should in its turn be grasped not primarily as a theory of work, let alone of the industrial mode of production, but rather of the processes of *mana-facturing* that not so much efficiently as *officiantly* produce the subtle matter that is, I would further argue, ultimately refined into a kind of pure state in the brand name. (This would also mean that liberal and neoliberal economic theories are best understood not as theories of efficient but rather of *officiant markets*.) Durkheim, Mauss, along with other researchers working in the “*mana* moment” were, I am arguing, already up to their ears in the stuff without ever leaving Western Europe (neither Durkheim nor Mauss did any of their own ethnographic field work).

III

Marx’s first encounter with the concept of the fetish most likely goes back to his readings in the early 1840s in the history of religion. Among the works he consulted or at least knew of second hand were those of Charles de Brosses who in 1760 introduced the concept of the fetish into European debates on the elementary forms of religious life. It is significant, I think, that the concept that would become so central to the labor theory of value began to get a grip on the European imagination at the end of the *ancien régime*, at the very moment, that is, when royal sovereignty along with the political theological doctrines and rituals that sustained it was beginning to yield to popular sovereignty—a shift that demanded new ways of establishing and sustaining social bonds. What Marx saw was that such bonds, such social relations, were coming to be determined by the relations of production of commodities, in a word, that the political theology of sovereignty was being displaced not only or even primarily by a political theory and practice of democracy but rather by the political economy of value, by the task of administering and managing a somehow

sacred, somehow spectral materiality. (Again, one should read management as *mana*-gement.) Ideology thus did not need to enter bourgeois economic relations in a secondary, super-structural way; it was always already there at its base, in the “base materiality” at issue in the *mana*-facturing process.

To repeat my claim, over the course of the nineteenth century, European theorists were extracting concepts from Europe’s various “primitive” and colonized “others” in order to grasp the transformation of social bonds brought about by historical processes of modernization. What allowed the theorists of the “*mana* moment” to recognize what the “*mana* workers”—another term I borrow from Mazzarella—were elaborating in the “primitive” cultures they were investigating was the fact that their own lives had at some level become *mana*-ical, absorbed by and busy with the everyday doxologies of value, doxologies once dedicated not only to God but also to his secular, political theological vicars on earth. As Marx argued, the political theology of sovereignty had, by the time the “*mana* moment” arrived, already become the political economy of the wealth of nations, which for that very reason meant that “wealth” was itself a misleading concept.

IV

I’d like to conclude by returning to the notion of the brand as the radical condensation of the spectral materiality at issue in the *mana*-facturing process. In her path-breaking book *No Logo*, first published in 2000, Naomi Klein presents in great and pungent detail the history of the trend in the corporate world to see the brand as the real locus of the value of the commodity (Klein 2010). In the book, she cites a number of corporate executives who proudly and, I would suggest, devoutly announce what seems to be a new *revelation of the name*, the glad tidings that the brand name functions no longer as the guarantee of the quality or reli-

ability of the product but as the site of its splendor—its glory, its *doxa*. But as we know, branding is no longer the prerogative and obligation just of corporations and, as John and Jean Comaroff (2009) have demonstrated, of nations and peoples; in the context of the reorganization of capitalism around what Gary Becker among others has theorized under the heading of *human capital*, once, that is, maximizing behavior is not restricted to market exchange but permeates all aspects of human life, every individual lives under the pressure to cultivate their own brand. We are all, at some level, interpellated as our own private *mana-facturing* enterprises; the elaboration of the spectral substance of value is now at some level performed, now *officiated* by, each member of the neoliberal polity. As the Comaroffs and others have noted, the difference between manufacturing and *mana-facturing* is largely put into practice by way of a new global articulation of commodity production. Actual, physical products are more and more manufactured “off shore” by workers hired by sub-contractors rather than directly by the parent company while the *mana-facturing* process—the production and maintenance of the brand—is performed in first-world corporate parks and offices. Some of that work is in its turn now further out-sourced to independent cognitive entrepreneur-laborers working in the “gig-economy,” itself a high-tech return to the putting-out system.

Against this background it should, perhaps, come as less of a surprise that the current president has managed to amalgamate political office, person, and brand. I am even tempted to say that Trump is not fully mistaken when he repeatedly claims that there is no real conflict of interest between his duties as president and those of running his business. He may in fact simply be naming a new mutation in modern political economy, call it *brand-name sovereignty*. What this means is that the conceptual—and lived—distinction between *homo politicus* and *homo economicus* has lost its salience. “Trump,” we might say, is the proper name, or rather, the brand name, of this zone of indistinction. Trump’s own

autodoxological drive of self-appreciation—his constant need to be praised and to praise himself in front of others, to amplify the value of his personal brand—would then no longer be a contingent quirk, the personality disorder of the present incumbent of the office of president, but rather something transpiring within the office itself, call it the rebranding of sovereignty.

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In “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin characterizes capitalism not only as a remorseless cult practiced 24/7; he also suggests that it is the first religion that *infinitezes* debt/guilt (*Schuld*) rather than offering redemption. We could perhaps say that what ultimately drives the process that Marx characterized as the self-valorization of Value is a *mana-ical enjoyment* circling around a surplus scarcity that can never be made good, a sort of repetition compulsion at the heart of every narrative that “allows” us to convert that scarcity into a payable debt—a conversion that makes *mana-theists* of us all. Against this background, a notion like sabbath rest assumes a new aspect (as does its radicalization in the notion of the messianic). I would suggest that the cessation of work at issue in what could be called our sabbatical calling, pertains not to work as such but rather to the *mana-facturing* process that keeps us *mana-ically* busy working off an impossible debt, filling in a surplus scarcity that ultimately, in one historical form or other, belongs to the human condition.

I would like to close with a short text by the author of my first epigraph, Franz Kafka. My purpose is to indicate just how difficult it is to think through, let alone practice, this “strike” on the *mana-facturing* process, to grasp what it means to become *inofficiant* in one’s use of things. In a diary entry from February 15, 1920, Kafka wrote the following:

One day, many years ago, I sat on the slope of the Laurenziberg, feeling sad. I was considering the wishes I had for my life. The most

important or the most appealing wish was to attain a view of life (and—this was inescapably bound up with it—to convince others of it in writing) in which life retained its natural full complement of rising and falling, but at the same time would be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, as a dream, as a hovering. A beautiful wish perhaps, if I had truly wished it [wenn ich ihn richtig gewünscht hätte]. Somewhat like wishing to hammer together a table with painstakingly methodical craftsmanship, and at the same time to do nothing at all, and not in such a way that people could say: “This hammering is a nothingness to him,” but rather: “This hammering is really a hammering to him yet at the same time it is also a nothingness,” whereby the hammering would have become still bolder, still more resolute, still more real, and, if you will, still more crazy [irrsinniger]. (Kafka 1994, pp. 179–80; my translation)

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