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Could commodities themselves speak? An introduction to the agnotology of the spectacle

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Abstract

This article introduces the 'agnotology of spectacle'. While agnotology is a relatively recent term used to describe the production and use of ignorance, we argue that Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1992) is an early attempt to outline a global field of disinformation and secrecy. For Debord, such secrecy is required to maintain the political and moral authority of what he defined as 'spectacle', namely the images used by states and corporations to mediate relations of power with consumers and citizens. We consider how the spectacle creates fields of disinformation and secrecy to maintain its political and moral authority by examining notes in commodities that purport to be calls for help from coerced labourers in China. These notes allow us to assess the uncanny experience of consuming goods manufactured across global supply chains which may well comprise of serious labour exploitation. However, these sources also demand a more expansive agnotology than that provided by Debord: one that engages with labour processes, contracts and race. We therefore develop Debord's ideas by examining the work of Mills and Benaji. Finally, drawing on Brecht's concept of the 'estrangement effect', we discuss how exploited workers can co-opt the aesthetics of the uncanny to articulate their subject position within a global agnotological field.

Keywords

Agnotology, coerced labour, commodity fetish, global supply chains, secrecy

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Correction (February 2024): Affiliations for both the authors have been updated in this version.

Introduction

We are foreign prisoners in Shanghai Qinqpu prison China forced to work against our will.
Please help us and notify human rights organisation.

The above note was found by a six-year-old girl from London in 2019 inside a box of Christmas cards bought from the supermarket Tesco (Pang, 2021: 134). Many similar cases of notes, seemingly from Chinese workers, found in commodities sold in the West have recently been compiled by Amelia Pang (2021). One notable instance from 2014 involves a woman from Fermanagh finding a note in a pair of Primark trousers alleging slave labour conditions in a Chinese prison: 'Our job inside the prison is to produce fashion clothes for export. We work 15 hours per day and the food we eat wouldn't even be given to dogs or pigs' (Siddique, 2019). The next year, a similar letter was found in black socks bought from a Primark in Newcastle (Cockroft, 2015).

In response to the note found in the Christmas cards, the Chinese foreign ministry briefed media that the Shanghai Qinqpu prison does not use forced labour by foreign convicts (Siddique, 2019). The manufacturer, Zhejiang Yunguang printing factory, also denied using prison labour (Anon, 2019). Primark similarly declared the letters found in its socks to be a hoax (Cockroft, 2015). The prisoners sending such letters may themselves feel the burden of proving their authenticity, as indicated by one recently stitching their ID card into a Regatta coat; an object also found in the West (Hawkins, 2023). We believe that these incidents are most likely genuine. A recent documentary directed by Laetitia Moreau speaks to victims of involuntary labour in Chinese prisons, a practice that has a decades-long history in the *Laogai* system, where political prisoners would be forced to work (Moreau, 2023; Laogai Research Foundation).

Chinese prison labour has seemingly intensified in the last decade. Several NGO reports demonstrate that forced labour is increasingly integral to China's governance and industry as the state has placed tens of thousands of Uyghur Muslims from the north western Xinjiang region into 27 known 'detention centres' or 'concentration camps': institutions which the Chinese government refers to as 'Vocational Education and Training camps' (VETCs) (see Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022; Xinjiang Victims Database, 2022). These reports compile evidence of forced labour conditions, including restrictions on freedom of movement, excessive overtime, military style management, bans on religious practice, political indoctrination, forced medical interventions, sexual assault and rape (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). While the Chinese letters might not be from Uyghur Muslims, apparently anyone who professes an opinion, religion or ideology that does not sit well with the Chinese Communist Party can find themselves in a VETC (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). For instance, a letter found in Halloween decorations in Oregon in 2012 identified Falun Gong practitioners as targeted for persecution (Pang, 2021: 2–5). This letter was verified as authentic, as its author was tracked down by the *New York Times* (Pang, 2021: 173).

Although we believe that such letters are genuine, their uncertain origins create an unsettling effect on Western audiences. The woman who found the note in the Halloween decorations was distressed and her husband wondered whether it was a hoax (Pang, 2021: 4–6). Lucy Kirk tweeted images of the message found in socks from Primark (Kirk, 2015). Many of the responses expressed incredulity towards Primark's claim that they would investigate the situation, and Lucy was concerned about reprisals against the worker who supposedly

wrote it. Other respondents believed that the note was fake, questioning whether a prisoner could access pen and paper. Some respondents believed they were hoaxes, albeit distressing ones indicating the truth of Chinese labour conditions. These letters therefore occupy a zone between the parafictional (fictions experienced as fact) and the parafactual (fact experienced as fiction) (see Lambert-Beatty, 2009). Indeed, the most highly rated comment in a *Daily Mail* article is: 'To admit that these notes are true would be to admit that slave and prison labour is used to produce these products, something that neither the companies nor China wishes to do' (see comment from 'Stoat' in Cockroft, 2015). Another highly-rated post stated, 'It's a plant probably put in there by a UK charity to raise awareness' (see comment from 'Peter' in Cockroft, 2015). In this case, the perception is that the letter might be fake, but nonetheless expresses something true. In a 'post-truth' media environment where news spreads for the emotions and shock it elicits rather than its veracity (see McIntyre, 2018: 5), the parafactual attracts attention as an experience rather than as information, and unsettles readers' perceptions of reality.

The parafactual experience these letters produce corresponds with Freud's account of the uncanny: an unsettling experience caused by the appearance of anxiety-inducing emotions, feelings, ideas and memories repressed from consciousness. Just like our letters, Freud claims that the uncanny is experienced when divisions between fact and fiction become blurred: 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality' (Freud, 1955: 243). Indeed, like our parafactual letters, Cixous frames the uncanny as neither fiction nor reality, but 'fiction in reality', or 'another form of reality', or 'a hybrid body composed of language and silence that [...] invents doubles, and death' (Cixous, 1976: 546, 548). Cixous's recurring feature of the uncanny, the double and death, is also described by Freud, who claims that the uncanny can take the form of an encounter with an entity resembling oneself but otherwise usually concealed (Freud, 1955). Such a 'double and death' is raised by our Chinese letters, which present western consumers with their *Döppelgänger*: the exploited and endangered producer of the commodities they consume. One note, found in a pregnancy test in France, seems to be aware of this uncanny encounter with the usually concealed double, asking the recipient: 'do you know that behind your peaceful life, there are Chinese prisoners?' (Moreau, 2023: 00.01.52) Pang remarks: 'what's striking to me about this letter is that a pregnancy test is supposed to symbolise the beginning of life, you know, a new life, and here it was manufactured by someone who is between life and death' (Moreau, 2023: 00.54.20). As Freud anticipated, this uncanny 'double' acts as a 'harbinger of death', but also as a manifestation of our moral conscience (Freud, 1955).

More recently, Agamben stated that the slave is an uncanny figure in Western society: 'in Western Culture, the slave is something like the repressed. The re-emergence of the figure of the slave in the modern worker thus appears, according to the Freudian scheme, as a return of the repressed.' (Agamben, 2015: 21) Several broad explanations for such repression have been proposed. First, best exemplified by Paglen's analysis of 'dark places' or 'secret economies' (Paglen, 2010), is that governments and corporations conceal some of their operations, denying oversight, or even knowledge, of spaces in which their agencies may be breaching human rights. A second explanation looks to market complexities. In a recent literature review of theories that 'follow the thing', Hulme draws attention to 'unfollowable' moments in commodity supply chains: phases of production or distribution that are blind-spots to the researcher (Hulme, 2017: 157–160). Rather than such 'unfollowable' incidents marking 'clunky' moments of capitalism, that is, the phases of inefficiency when objects are lost or unaccounted, for Hulme such phases are 'structural' to globalised capitalism (159).

Hulme and others have analysed such ‘structural’ concealment of the life of a commodity as ‘fetishism’, that is, the commodity’s appearance as autonomous from the labour that produced it (158). For instance, because supply chains can distance – psychologically and geographically – the commodity from the production process, Müller et al. (2021) have described such fetishism as a ‘geography of dissociation’ that emphasises different forms of strategic agency deployed by producers and marketers that ‘obfuscate, hide, downplay, reframe, and separate’ (91) shameful aspects of commodity production. Finally, we have already referenced the significance of the ‘post-truth’ information environment, but also relevant is the older and broader concept of ‘disinformation’: information produced to mislead and misdirect (see Fallis, 2015). Concerns over disinformation, whether in the notes themselves or in denials of their authenticity, contribute to the para-factual experience felt as uncanny.

The concept of agnotology provides an umbrella category to group these (and perhaps other) overlapping processes: repression, fetishism, disassociation, dark places, fake news, disinformation. A relatively recent field, agnotology is the study of how ignorance is manufactured and strategically deployed (McGoey, 2019: 29–30; Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008). The argument of this article is that Debord provides a basis for theorising an agnotology of global capitalism and, consequently, for the para-factual encounters between Chinese workers and western consumers. In *Society of the Spectacle* (2006), Debord defined ‘the spectacle’ as the images, found across the globe in both liberal and bureaucratic capitalist regimes, that mediate social relationships. The spectacle manifests unobtainable values to their audience to deflect attention from their real interests and so prevent collective organisation. Connecting this concept with agnotology may at first seem surprising, because the spectacle points to highly visible phenomena rather than concealed or dissimulated ones. Indeed, Debord claims ‘[the Spectacle’s] sole message is “what is good appears and what appears is good”’ (Debord, 2006: 9–10). However, an implication here is: *what is bad is concealed*. Debord makes this implication explicit in his later, often overlooked, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, where he describes disinformation as having a real and ‘inverted spectacular definition [*concept spectaculaire inversé*]’, so that ‘where disinformation is named, it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named’ (Debord, 1992: 41). In other words, the spectacle discredits whatever challenges it as disinformation, and spreads disinformation to maintain its own image. The role of disinformation is part of Debord’s project in this later book to define the spectacle as a theory of secrecy. The subtitle of the book translates as ‘A Treatise on Secrets’, and in it Debord defines the spectacle as a form of ‘generalised secrecy’ (see also Bratich, 2006: 494). The result is a media landscape in which ‘the spectacle confines itself to revealing a tiresome world of obligatory incomprehensibility’ (Debord, 1992: 49).

Debord’s concern for ‘generalised secrecy’ and ‘obligatory incomprehensibility’ makes his work a precursor to the recent field of agnotology. Adapting Debord’s ideas, we believe it is more useful to conceptualise ‘an agnotology’ rather a ‘secrecy’ of the spectacle. The former term encompasses a wider range of practices than disinformation and concealment, as it describes a highly differentiated epistemic field in which truth and falsity merge in various degrees and through multiple processes; one in which consumers can both be aware of abuses within global supply chains but also upset when directly confronted with them. We show how Debord’s concept of spectacle, and the agnotology that is part of it, is a consequence of his effort, with the theory of the spectacle, to develop upon Marx’s concept of fetishism by paying greater attention to the role of political authority in commodity production. Marx’s commodity fetishism was – like the spectacle – a theory of secrecy; the fetish’s ‘secret’ being, for Marx, the hidden source of the commodity’s value in

labour. We argue that Debord's closer attention to the interpenetration of state and capital in the production of 'a generalised secrecy' in global capitalism provides a basis for theorising how government and corporations collude in using supply chains to concurrently persecute citizens and drive down labour costs.

However, while Debord's work offers a starting point for analysing these processes, we also note that he does not address two political issues raised by our Chinese letters: forced labour and the racial division of labour. We therefore develop his theory by drawing on the work of Banaji and Mills, who respectively consider how global economic networks are shaped by employment practices and race. Read alongside one another, both thinkers show how the 'fetishism of the wage' (a term from Vishmidt, 2018) is one of the processes involved in the spectacle's agnotology. This type of fetishism, not considered by Debord, is the belief that labour, like commodities, are sold freely on the market without coercion. This fetish obscures the violence required to extract work from labourers, whether waged or not. The agnotology of the spectacle concerns wage fetishism as much as commodities, as it conceals, denies or distracts from the abuses of labour required to maintain our spectacular society.

Before exploring Debord, it is worth examining Marx's account of secrecy in his theory of commodity fetishism to demonstrate how it alone cannot account for how Western consumers react to abuses in supply chains. Two social scientists, Brown and Billig, have already attempted to develop Marx's theory of commodity fetishism to account for how consumers tacitly accept the presence of forced labour in commodity production. Our analysis of these arguments shows how Brown and Billig analyse exploitation known to consumers, and they theorise the acceptance of such exploitation in the public imagination through racism or inattentiveness: factors that have no basis in the theory of commodity fetishism itself. We do not deny the role of these psychological mechanisms in making consumers complicit with global exploitation. But rather than consider them as emergent from commodity fetishism, we instead consider them as factors playing alongside fetishism in a broader agnotology that comprises multiple and distinct psychological, political and economic processes. We argue that Debord's conception of secrecy, and a broader agnotology built from it, is therefore a departure as much as a development on Marx's account of the commodity's secret, in that it addresses how the control over public knowledge constructs and maintains the political authority of governments and corporations.

A point we will conclude on is whether and how exploited workers can achieve agency in defying the agnotology of global supply chains. The notes they send in commodities are one means to disrupt the receivers' apathy. Another, however, is to strategically adopt the uncanny effect of their voice, text and presence, creating what Brecht would call an 'estrangement effect' that unsettles its audience into political reflection and action (Brecht, 1964: 191–192). We show how the poetry of Xu Lihzi, a Chinese factory worker, found a posthumous global readership, by using such effects. This poetry concerns the issues we consider: the uncanny, secrecy, obscurity, exploitation – and in its strangeness forces its readers into an encounter with working conditions at the production end of the supply chain.

Marx's theory of secrecy and psychological repression

A theory of secrecy accompanies Marx's account of commodity fetishism, thus the subtitle in *Capital vol. 1*, 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret' (Marx, 1990: 163). The secret is how capitalist social relations obscure the real source of a commodity's value. During exchange, the value of the commodity seems to emerge from its relation to other commodities rather than the labour that went into its production. The commodity therefore appears as 'the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for

them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (165). Therefore, the secret of the commodity is that, despite appearances, its value is an emergent property of abstract labour, i.e., the collective labour that went into its production. Marx writes: 'the determination of the magnitude of value by labour-time is therefore a secret, hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities' (168).

Marx used uncanny ideas and concept to explain how the commodity conceals the source of its value in abstract labour. He describes the commodity's materialisation of human labour as a 'phantom-like objectivity [*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*]' (128); as David Harvey explains:

Exchange-value is a necessary representation of the human labour embodied in commodities. When you go into the supermarket you can find out the exchange-values, but you can't see or measure the human labour embodied in the commodities directly. It is that embodiment of human labour that has a phantom-like presence on the supermarket shelves. (Harvey, 2006: 20)

For Harvey, Marx's concept of phantom-like objectivity implies that the 'secret' of commodity value, labour, haunts the market as an uncanny, ghostly presence.

Unsurprisingly, many have attempted to synthesise Freud's account of the uncanny with Marx's account of commodity fetishism. Most influential is Derrida's analysis of commodity fetishism in *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida, 1994: 208–209, 217–218). Derrida notes that Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, like Freud's understanding of the uncanny, presents something immediately familiar yet strange and alien (212). Marx provides the uncanny image of a table, which 'continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing' (Marx, 1990: 163). However, this familiar object becomes strange:

as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (163)

This image of a dancing table likely refers to a *seance*, or communication with ghosts that would move the table around where the spiritualists sat (Derrida, 1994: 189). For Marx, the commodified table presents an uncannier experience of the familiar combined with the alien than communication with the dead.

It is questionable whether Marx and Freud's concepts overlap. There are obvious differences. Marx's concern was how the market does not make the source of a commodity's value self-evident to sensory experience while Freud addressed the repression of thoughts and desires too unbearable for consciousness. Derrida did not address whether the 'secrets' of these two theories could be unproblematically assumed to be alike, deferring thorough analysis of their interrelationship to a future study which never came (209). Social scientists attempting to suture the theories struggled to account for a concept of commodity fetishism in Freudian terms. An analysis of Brown and Billig's arguments demonstrates the problems of grounding psychological processes of repression in Marx's thought.

Brown claims that 'the spectral completion of commodity fetishism (where things appear to have lives of their own) is human reification (where people appear to be no more than things)' (Brown, 2006: 180). A human that appears to be no more than a thing is a slave, and such slaves appear uncanny when represented in cultural artefacts that intend to represent their thing-like status. Brown's example is collectable objects representing racist depictions of African-Americans, including nineteenth-century mechanical coin banks (188–193).

He argues that such commodities become uncanny due to the slave's 'ontological' condition 'between animate and inanimate, subject and object, human and thing' (180–182, 199). Brown bases this theory on Ernst Jentsch's account of the uncanny as residing in dolls and automata appearing between object and subject, life and death (198–199). However, Brown overlooks Freud's objection to Jentsch's account. For Freud, uncanny experiences do not result from the intellectual uncertainty created by the object's ambiguity, but rather by stimulating the return of repressed emotions and ideas. By contrast, Brown asserts that the collectibles he studies reassured their racist consumers of the slaves' inferiority, hardly unsettling social norms (186). Furthermore, Brown only reads these objects and the slave returning as uncanny in the context of their representation in film and literature, sites where the return can be established by fictional devices (like coin banks coming to life in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* from 2000) (183). He therefore limits his analysis to the uncanny as cultural representation, rather than actual commodities.

Like Brown, Billig also considers the relationship between consumers and their racialised and exploited 'Other'. He draws the same parallels we have between repression and Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, arguing that consumer societies endemically misremember the labour that goes into commodity production:

We should remember that the fetishized commodities whose daily consumption is so important to us and to our sense of ourselves are produced by unnamed 'Others'. Our routines of life, not to mention our habits of interpretation, distract us from this remembering. Thanks to such routines, we can habitually forget that our many possessions have been produced by the labour of repressed Others. (Billig, 1999: 327)

This argument is similar to recent analyses of consumers actively 'forgetting' or 'disassociating' exploitative labour from their commodities (e.g., Ibert et al., 2019: 51–52). However, neither Billig nor these more recent studies theorise the uncanny. Billig's discussion touches on why this is the case: Western images of exploited workers do not disquiet consumers because these images appear disconnected from the commodities they consume (Billig, 1999: 326). He also claims that 'the repressed can also return in safe forms', such as how Live Aid presents the "Third World" as a passive object of charity to be rescued through consuming charitable commodities (326). Similarly, 'Fair Trade' offers a 'safe' image of globalised supply chains to Western consumers (Littler, 2008: 44). But such images are 'safe' precisely because they do not produce uncanny experiences.

Brown and Billig cannot synthesise a theory of psychological repression with commodity fetishism, because even if fetishism conceals the real source of a commodity's value in labour, it does not conceal the existence of that labour; indeed, it is often present to such consumers either directly or in the media. Billig describes how Western consumers do not 'repress' knowledge of exploitation across global supply chains, but rather habitually 'forget' them. Similarly, racial inequality was normalised enough in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for there to be a market for the racist coin banks Brown analyses. To account for instances of the uncanny like our Chinese letters, one therefore has to consider a range of repressive mechanisms that lie outside the process of commodity fetishism. These letters produced an uncanny effect not only because they presented the consumer with forced labour in global supply chains – a fact they may have been dimly aware of – but rather because such letters were para-factual statements of uncertain veracity because the abuses they testified were actively hidden by the Chinese state and denied or deflected by Western retailers, creating doubt over their authenticity. This agency of governmental and corporate communications in trying to shape what is known

and seen is not accounted for by Marx in his theory of commodity fetishism, yet is essential to understanding how it emerges in the experience of commodities in the global market, and is precisely what Debord, with his concept of the spectacle and its secrecy, tries to address.

The spectacle of secrecy

Debord conceived the spectacle as a development of commodity fetishism, arguing that ‘The fetishism of the commodity – the domination of society by “imperceptible as well as perceptible things” – attains its ultimate fulfilment in the spectacle’ (Debord, 2006: 19). Yet, it has been claimed that Debord misreads Marx. Frayssé argues that Debord characterises the spectacle as the worship of images (Frayssé, 2019: paragraph 9). Indeed, Debord writes, ‘Like the old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and miraculous cures, the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent arousal. All this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission’ (Debord, 2006: 33). Adopting one of Debord’s own terms, for Frayssé, this is a *détournement* of Marx’s concept, as Marx did not define commodity fetishism as submission to worshipful images, but as a set of social relations generating the illusion that the value of commodities were inherent to them rather than resulting from abstract labour (Frayssé, 2019: paragraphs 11–13).

We believe that the spectacle’s *détournement* from Marx’s theory resulted not simply from a misreading of Marx, although this may be a factor. Debord was adapting his concept to an issue beyond the scope of commodity fetishism; namely political authority, or ‘domination of society’, to repeat a phrase. Debord’s concern with ‘domination’, the maintenance of political regimes’ authority, is often stated in *Society of the Spectacle*. The commodity ‘dominates the entire economy’ or ‘colonises social life’, and ‘Modern economic production’ is a ‘dictatorship’ (Debord, 2006: 20–21). The spectacle ‘serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system’ (8); it is an agent of subjugation ‘able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them’ (10). Marx did not analyse commodity fetishism as a type of political regime; indeed, during his discussion of this concept he only directly addresses unequal political relations in the context of feudal, and not capitalist, society (170). The spectacle, therefore, is not simply the concept of commodity fetishism extended to the media and images of a society, but also to political regimes. Debord makes this point explicitly. He first claims that the spectacle is ‘its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life’, and that such ‘domination’ has a fetishistic character because it makes its rule seem like ‘a second Nature’, rather than a set of social relationships (13). Furthermore, this ‘second Nature’ is a form of state power: ‘The social separation reflected in the spectacle is inseparable from the modern state’ (13). Whether or not Debord misreads Marx, his concept of the spectacle adapts fetishism into an agent of state power, one which appears similar to religious worship as it involves subjugation to images as if they were ‘a second Nature’.

Debord departed from Marx’s understanding of fetishism to address political authority and power because his concern was not with the mechanics of industrial capitalism, but rather the global condition of 1960s capitalism. He addressed the separation of the globe into spheres of influence by claiming there were two forms of spectacle: diffuse and concentrated. The diffuse spectacle is present in Western societies, and evident in every commodity (32). The concentrated spectacle is evident in ‘bureaucratic capitalism’ and embodied in the figure of dictators ruling over a ‘police state’ (31–32). Debord claims that both spectacles present an image of social unification, but one without meaningful substance, and only produced and sustained through violence and exploitation (31). Dictators bear similar qualities to a commodity, in that the community they embody is illusory and they are

replaceable when they become outmoded (34–35). Conversely, like political leaders, commodities manifest an aura of economic and political legitimacy: ‘each individual commodity is justified in the name of the grandeur of the total commodity production, of which the spectacle is a laudatory catalogue’ (32). That commodities can endorse conflicting ‘social policies’ underlines this point. Debord’s example is how tourism and the car industry demand different forms of urban planning (32). Commodities therefore not only have value, according to Debord, but legitimacy in that they represent what is legally and socially acceptable.

Debord’s synthesis of fetishism with political authority in the concept of the spectacle allows him to develop an alternative theory of secrecy to Marx, one responsive to a global situation in which the world was becoming divided between bureaucratic and liberal forms of capitalism. This analysis appears in the later less well-known *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1992), where Debord elaborates a third type of spectacle in addition to the diffuse and the concentrated: ‘the integrated’ (Debord, 1992: 12). Such a spectacle is produced when economic and state powers assimilate into each other, ‘assuring the greatest common advantages in all domains’ (15). Debord emphasised secrecy as an essential component of this political form: a ‘generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most vital operation’ (18). He later describes the integrated spectacle as one in which ‘secrecy dominates this world, and above all as the secrecy of domination’ (50), and that this spectacle represents ‘the total victory of the secret’ (53). Debord’s focus on secrecy follows his thinking about how the diffuse and concentrated spectacle combine, in the integrated spectacle, into a single regime:

Our society is built on the secret, from the ‘shell companies’ that shelter from all light the concentrated wealth of their owners, to the ‘defence secrets’ that today cover an immense domain of full extra-judicial liberty of the State; from the often frightening secrets of *shoddy production*, which are hidden by advertising. (44)

The secrecy of the integrated spectacle combines the authority of the commodity and the state, giving an appearance of freedom and legitimacy to societies combining plutocratic and oppressive regimes with consumer culture.

While Debord used 1980s Italy and France as examples of the integrated spectacle (12), this attention to the combined agency of the state and market may seem apposite to China, which is often described as ‘state capitalist’ or, more recently, ‘a state constituted market economy’ (Weber and Qi, 2022); concepts that, while debated in their precise meaning, nevertheless are suited for a Chinese government that organises forced labour for capitalist markets. That said, such ‘state capitalism’ is hardly unique to China. There is so much corporate involvement in prison labour that USA can be said to have a comparable Prison Industrial Complex (O’Connell Davidson, 2015: 97). Furthermore, Western corporations are implicated in such ‘state capitalism’. As Kenway observes, Western retailers like Tesco and Primark, discussed in the introduction, are not innocent of the poor conditions in their supply chains, because the cheap prices they demand for good incentivises exploitation (Kenway, 2021: 124–125). Adopting a term from Linsey McGoey, Kenway, claims that the complexity of supply chains provides Western brands with a ‘useful unknown’; allowing them to subcontract unethical practices to distant organisations about which they can ultimately profess ignorance (Kenway, 2021: 34, 120; McGoey, 2019: 34–35). The integrated spectacle, the presented authority of state capitalism, therefore has to be considered as a global phenomenon that corporations and Western states participate in by claiming their

categorical distinction from ‘totalitarian’ states while ignoring their own similar practices or how they operate with them through their supply chains.

A key function of the integrated spectacle is that both governments and markets contribute to the generalised field of secrecy (15). One can see both processes in China. The “Vocational Education and Training” camps suggest the forced labour they facilitate is for the benefit of the people they process. The government’s broadcasted propaganda about these camps includes interviews with workers claiming that they appreciated their time there, were free to leave when they wished and that the experience drew them away from extremist ideology (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022: 13). Detainees were forced to maintain these lies after they were discharged, with one interviewee for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report claiming that ‘We had to sign a document to remain silent about the camp. Otherwise, we would be kept for longer and there would be punishment for the whole family’ (13).

Just as states conceal their own abuses, they also use the complexity of supply chains as a means of secrecy and persecution. While the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has pointed out 83 international companies benefitting from forced labour, the complexity of Chinese supply chains makes it difficult for companies to know whether forced labour was used to make their products (27). China uses detention centres to accumulate Uyghur labour that it then supplies to factories across China; a strategy that ‘assimilates’ Uyghurs among the wider population (Xiuzhang Xu et al., 2020: 14–16). ASPI estimates that over 80,000 people have been transferred from Xianjiang between 2017 and 2019 (Xiuzhang Xu et al., 2020: 14). Although the US government passed the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act to prevent goods made ‘wholly or part’ with forced labour from entering the US, the complexity of Chinese supply chains means that forced labour in Xinjiang is often part of the production process for companies based outside of this region (Kashgarian, 2022). Just as the government uses propaganda to conceal forced labour, market complexity also provides cover for assimilating and coercing Uyghur workers.

The efforts by the US government to monitor abuses in Chinese supply chains demonstrate that the agnotology of the spectacle operates globally. China tries to conceal the extent of its use of forced labour from NGOs and foreign governments seeking to hold it accountable to international law, as well as corporations concerned for their brand. In reaction to the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act, a Chinese diplomat to the USA stated that the ‘allegations of “forced labour” and “genocide” in Xinjiang are nothing but vicious lies concocted by anti-China forces’ (see Spokesperson’s Remarks (2013)). Yet, following the US, the EU now proposes to ban importing goods made with forced labour, noting that: ‘The majority of forced labour takes place in the private economy, while some is imposed by States’ (European Commission, 2022). The EU’s proposal was prompted by reactions to Chinese labour conditions (Blenkinsop, 2022). Yet, this proposed legislation is generic enough to apply to supply chains globally, demonstrating that the phenomenon is hardly unique to China.

While we have used the example of labour conditions in China to outline an agnotology of the spectacle, the information and disinformation we have of this example is itself conditioned by global, geopolitical struggles. ASPI’s report on Uyghur labour that we have regularly cited was partly funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Xiuzhong Xu, 2020) and ASPI claims to work closely with the Australian government. The military and defence industries are well represented among its many corporate sponsors, including Lockheed Martin, Leidos, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, Thales and Senetas (for details see <https://www.aspi.org.au/sponsors>). Debord was aware that geopolitical and economic competition between hostile and rival powers generates fields of secrecy and disinformation

(1992: 38). Much of the data that has informed our thinking is built on knowledge about China that Western states and corporations wanted to make public. While we do not know the motivations of individual corporations and states in supporting such research, one can assume that this information could be used to galvanise a hawkish political and military agenda.

In summary, an agnology of the spectacle is required to account for the ‘parafactual’ and ‘uncanny’ experience of the Chinese letters. These letters produce epistemic uncertainty for Western audiences because they raise doubts over the statements and self-image of states, corporations and the seeming innocence of the commodities themselves, thereby forcing denials and investigations. Subject to corporate and official gaslighting, the natural and understandable concern the receivers of these letters have for their authors is therefore thrown into confusion, resulting in discussions of conspiracy among the commentariat. Amidst such a field of disinformation and disassociation in which it is not clear what is true nor false, disinformation itself becomes a spectacle, one in which ‘false news’ is reported because the uncanny experience it produces is itself an attractive experience for readers. Even if we are certain the letters are not hoaxes, such certainty hardly dispels the uncertainty they raise, because the extensive violence and injustice within supply chains remain unknowable (McKean, 2020: 55). In the integrated spectacle, ‘no one ever knows the real cost of anything which is produced: actually, the most important part of the real cost is never calculated; and the rest is kept secret’ (Debord, 1992: 58).

The fetishism of the wage

There are two aspects of global supply chains Debord never engages with. First are the exact labour processes: there are multiple types of slavery and compulsion; second is racism and the racial division of labour that marks the global economy. These are broad subjects, impossible to comprehensively analyse here. However, we can consider the ideas of two influential historians who engage with these respective subjects: Banaji and Mills. Their ideas complete our agnology of spectacle when developed to engage with fetishism *and* the repression of knowledge about forced labour. They do this by theorising, from different perspectives, what Marina Vishmidt calls the ‘fetishism of the wage’; that is, that people are freely subject to labour via free contract. Whereas Banaji analyses such fetishization from the perspective of the labour process, Mills engages with its racialised element.

Banaji (2011) argues that forced labour is not incidental, but integral to capitalism. He distinguishes modes of production (for instance, capitalism and feudalism) from labour processes (such as slavery and wage labour). He contends that many types of labour processes exist within a social formation, so for instance, the existence of slavery in early modern slave plantations did not make its industries any less capitalistic: labour was still bought as a commodity – in this case, as slavery – to produce commodities. For Banaji, what characterised slave plantations as distinct from industrial capitalist enterprises was not the presence of forced labour, but rather how it was used to produce and maintain profits with consistently low levels of capital investment (71). Similarly, the existence of forced labour within global supply chains for Western products should be considered a standard component of capitalism, albeit, ones which may have different economic and social functions than existed in American slave plantations. For Banaji, Capitalism accommodates a regularly changing and complex spectrum of compelled labour, such as waged employment (which, as Marx recognised, is compelled to a degree), slavery and debt-bondage, as well as diverse legal regimes that produce and distribute such labour processes.

Banaji's analysis allows for a critique of the binary division between 'free' and 'unfree' labour. Banaji argues that 'free labour' is a legal fiction that obscures the uneven positions of negotiation between parties (135, 138–140). Kenway and O'Connell Davidson make the same point, showing how the concept of 'modern slavery' obscures the relationship between forced labour and capitalist exploitation by assuming a clear distinction between forced and free labour (Kenway, 2021: 115–116; O'Connell Davidson, 2015: 77). As Vishmidt argues, Marx was aware of this legal fiction, recognising this 'fetishism of the wage' (Vishmidt's term) in his reference to how, in capitalist society, 'the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion' (2018: 47–48).

Banaji's work indicates how compelled labour is repressed by fetishism and how this repressed element inevitably 'returns'. Because there is no clear binary between free and coerced commodity production, coercion is a necessary component of capitalism. Similar to wage labour, even 'strictly' forced slaves experience a *minimalist* type of freedom in which one accepts the coercion one has to bear, as distinct from actual freedom from coercion (150). Rather than a binary of free and forced workers, there is only a spectrum moving from those who comfortably accept compulsion, those who can bear it and those who cannot, but are forced 'in a strict sense' (143). The necessity of compulsion to commodity production is repressed by the fetishism of the wage, i.e., the wage contract with its legal fiction of labour sold 'freely'. It is a fetishism also evident in the Chinese concentration camps studied above, branded as 'Vocational Education and Training camps', as if the abuses within them were voluntary and beneficial to the worker.

Inevitably, the repressed returns. While this legal fiction of free contract may repress the existence of compulsion within commodity production, it cannot represent the range of labour processes, as well as legal or financial devices, used to force people to work, as the complex reality of the various forms of labour across global supply chains does not correspond to the binary implied between free and unfree labour. This binary represses awareness of diverse labour processes that Banaji analyses, and acts as a 'racial contract'. For Mills the imagined normative model of the worker freely selling their labour is a white Western one, and coerced labour conversely becomes fictionalised as belonging to non-Western 'totalitarian' or 'developing' nations, or to the West's ugly but ultimately redeemable past (Mills, 2014).

This same process, Mills argues, occurs in Marxism. By constructing race as a secondary function of class, race becomes a 'spectre' haunting subsequent Marxist theorising (Mills, 1999). Tsing (2009) notably argues that Marx and Engel's focus on the Industrial Revolutions' proletariat implied a heroic and proud framing of labour that was not just white and male but also at the geographic centre of capitalism's dynamism and therefore a figurative protagonist of a universal social movement. Tsing argues that it was this notional gender, race and nationality blind spot of early analyses that failed to appreciate the 'bigness' and diversity of global capitalism and for this reason there has been a failure to account for questions of diversity within global supply chains' structures of power (149).

Developing Tsing's point, we add to Mills' thesis that race is repressed from Marxism not only due to the primacy Marxists give to class-based oppression, but also in its occlusion of forced labour from its account of fetishism. Marx never addresses the interaction between forced labour and commodity fetishism. Similar to Brown, Edward Ford III highlights how both concepts have an affinity in Marx's thought by appearing to be between object and subject (Ford, 2010: 26). Ford points out how Marx borrows the term 'speaking implement [*instrumentum vocale*]' from Marcus Terentius Varro to differentiate the slave from the tool and work-animal, and Ford highlights how this concept seems similar to the fetishised commodity, which could be characterised as a speaking object insofar as its value seems

to emerge from interpersonal relationships with other commodities (Marx, 1990: 303). But Marx never considers this parallel, perhaps because he saw slave plantations as an anomalous form of capitalist enterprise (Banaji, 2011: 143–144).

Banaji's and Mill's work, like other Marxist and liberal critical theories of contract, shows that the fetishisation of the wage is distinct from that of commodities because it results from legal rather than economic obfuscation (see Banaji, 2010: 134–142). Fetishism is therefore not only an economic relation, but also one of authority, backed by law and state. This dual nature of fetishism is experienced by workers and consumers. Debord (2006) recognised this in his analysis of the spectacle, which developed Marx's concept of fetishism by acting as an embodiment of state power and economic value. We noted above how the spectacle has a dual nature of being both related to capital – being 'capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images' (34) – but also sovereignty, its 'root' being 'that oldest of all social specialisations, the specialisation of power' (12–13), and that this duality of the spectacle as both an image of capital and political authority allowed Debord to claim that the spectacle reigned in both Allied and Soviet blocs: in the west as a 'diffuse spectacle' as the authority of commodities, and the East as the image of dictators (31).

Drawing from Banaji, Mills and Debord, we can now explicate an expanded agnotology of the spectacle and how it obscures supply chain operations. We organise our conclusion into 10 theses:

1. Forced labour is necessary for value production within capitalism and functions as a disciplinary tool used by governments.
2. Forced labour is partly concealed by wage fetishisation, that is, wage contracts purporting labour to be a commodity openly bought and sold like any other.
3. Wage fetishisation highlights how commodity production is not only an economic network, but also legal and political, as it is a form of obfuscation created by contract law.
4. Wage fetishisation embodies state authority as much as economic value, as the commodity's presence in the market is a statement of legitimised forms of production and consumption.
5. Capitalism not only conceals the conditions of production from consumers through fetishisation (whether of the commodity or the wage), but also by dividing the global market into distinct cultural and legal regimes.
A 'racial contract' is implicit in both wage fetishisation and the conceptual division between Western and non-Western regimes. This 'racial contract' imagines white Western workers freely selling labour as a normative image of labour and, co-extensively, that coerced labour belongs a racial or ethnic 'other' belonging to 'totalitarian' or 'developing' non-Western regimes.
6. This racial contract is not only implicit in Marxist theory (as Mills claims), but specifically Marx's concept of commodity fetishism which, in occluding forced labour from its theorisation, also elides the existence of racial and ethnic 'others'.
7. Competing global powers and corporations construct their own spectacle, an image of moral, legal and political legitimacy that can only exist by denying or concealing their use of force within supply chains.
8. Tensions and conflicts between major geopolitical powers mean that disinformation is a site of contest. Much information we have access to has been brought into the public sphere by Western corporate and state interests. The result is a global field of ignorance, not one in which truth is concealed and revealed, but rather competing narratives,

interpretations and half-truths aim to misdirect public opinion and maintain the spectacular image of states and corporations.

9. (Dis)information that seems to undermine the spectacular image of states or corporations can itself become a spectacle: the para-factual experience of the official spectacle being both affirmed and denied can itself become a consumer experience during media reporting.

While Western consumers may be aware of abuses in supply chains, encounters between workers and consumers across supply chains can be felt as uncanny due to para-factual doubts over their veracity.

10. As researchers, we operate within this field of agnotology, one involving multiple processes and factors such as fetishisation (of wages and commodities), racism, disinformation as well as competing state and corporate secrecy and investigations. The degree to which we are influenced by states and corporations within this field is unknown.

Conclusion: Secrecy and the subaltern

In her assessment of ‘following the thing’, Hulme wonders whether ‘following un-followable things forces us to look at the gaps, the bits we cannot follow; the bits where the subaltern most definitely resides’ (Hulme, 2017: 218–219). Laetitia Moreau’s documentary *Travail forcé, le SOS d’un prisonnier chinois* (2023), discussed in our introduction, is a powerful and commendable instance of an attempt to trace the path of an ‘un-followable thing’, a Chinese letter found in a pregnancy test. At the same time, the agnotology of the spectacle is not one of total cover-up, one which a dark unpalatable reality would be dismissed by a bright light of truth. It is instead a highly textured and differentiated field, where truth and fiction blend with shades of grey in between. Our survey of this field has included secrecy, disinformation, dissociation, fetishism, the uncanny, ‘useful ignorance’, the para-factual, the useful unknown, and may include much else besides.

The producers of *Travail forcé* used the Chinese letter found in a pregnancy test to gather support in the European Parliament for a stronger directive on corporate due diligence regarding human rights and supply chains (Moreau, 2003: 1.29.00–1.32.00; Wolters, 2023). This letter has a precedent in one that Chen Pokong, a political prisoner in a Chinese labour camp, had smuggled out of prison in 1994 and which acted as evidence of human rights violations in Chinese prison at the US House of Representative and at the UN (Pang, 2021: 123, 250–253). However, we should also be aware that greater knowledge of abuses taking place in supply chains may not always correspond to social action (McKean, 2020: 55). It is also far from given that the public are actually opposed to the exploitation of subaltern labourers (Walters, 2015: 289). Indeed, stories of Chinese letters likely sell as news due to the uncanny experience they provide their readership more than the truth they reveal of global supply chains.

Rather than rely solely on knowledge production and dissemination, McKean suggests that change requires ‘the creation of new social relations among people at different sites along the chain’ (2020: 55). One means to do this, as attempted by the Chinese letters, was to find platforms for victims to speak about their repression, thereby facilitating direct dialogue between populations that, as Debord often affirms, the spectacle seeks to divide, being ‘the official language of universal separation’ (2006: 7). Such a project would involve drawing attention to a wider range of sources than we can present here, including thousands of testimonies collected by the Xinjiang Victims Database, as well as the wider translation of works published by the Laogai Research Foundation (see Laogai research, <https://laogairesearch.org/publications/>). However, one smaller set of sources demonstrates how one

worker found some agency by expressing his experience of the uncanny within agnotological fields. These are the writings of Xu Lizhi (1990–2014), a poet, bibliophile and assembly line labourer for Foxconn in Shenzhen. Foxconn produces electrical goods, including the iPhone, and in 2012 its campus in Shenzhen employed hundreds of thousands of workers (there are various estimates) (see Anon, 2010 and Duhigg and Bradsher, 2012).

Xu was not a prisoner, but a wage worker, and not representative of the individuals who slipped letters in commodities. Nevertheless, as we have argued, wage workers are not ‘free’ workers and can, like slaves, suffer from abusive coercion. The coercion Xu experienced was disastrous: he attracted Western media attention when his poetry for *Foxconn People* (富士康人), an internal newsletter for Foxconn, were translated into English by his friends after his suicide (Tharoor, 2014). The number of Foxconn workers who committed suicide is unavailable, but enough cases emerged in 2010 to warrant substantial media coverage and for the company to install nets to prevent workers throwing themselves from the building (Chan et al., 2022). There are similar reports of suicides in Western industry, for instance, in Amazon’s warehouses (Solon and Farivar, 2021). But because Xu’s writing has achieved a Western audience, they offer a parallel case to our Chinese letters, and one which speaks to how the uncanny manifests itself on the side of production in China.

The selected, translated poems of Xu were written between 2011 and 2014 and cover a range of feelings and concepts we cannot survey here (see Goodman, 2016; Klein, 2019; Nao, 2014). But uncanny images recur as the narrator recalls how severe exploitation is wilfully ignored. He exists between person and machine, living and dead, and awake and asleep. A few examples include a poem titled ‘Terracotta Warriors on the Assembly Line’, which is a register of worker’s names, listed before their equipment (Goodman, 2016). ‘A Screw Fell to the Ground’ describes how a falling screw ‘won’t attract anyone’s attention/Just like last time/on a night like this/When someone plunged to the ground’ (Nao, 2014); a clear reference to suicides at Foxconn, and the acknowledgement that such a brutal end will not remain a ‘useful unknown’ to the company, state and media. Just like those who commit suicide, Xu feels that his life is marginalised from public visibility, so he identifies more with the dead: ‘Every time I open the window or the wicker gate/I seem like a dead man/Slowly pushing open the lid of a coffin’ (Nao, 2014). Freud’s characterisation of the uncanny ‘double’ as a figure between life and death seems here embodied by Xu himself, who feels hidden from the outside world.

Several of Xu’s poems describe as uncanny the indistinction between compulsion and freedom in wage work, including ‘The Last Graveyard’. ‘My Life’s Journey is Far from Complete’, and ‘I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron’ (Nao, 2014). We take as an example ‘I Fall Asleep, Just Standing Like That’, whose narrator was trained ‘to become docile’, so that they ‘Don’t know how to shout or rebel/How to complain or denounce/Only how to silently suffer exhaustion.’ After endless, compliant work on the factory line, the narrator finally asks, ‘How many days, how many nights/Did I – just like that – standing fall asleep?’ (Nao, 2014) The idea of being asleep while standing can be interpreted both as the mindless condition of repetitive labour, but also his disciplined docility of not questioning or complaining about his working conditions, as well as marking an uncanny state between life and death. The poem is therefore acutely aware of how repression is conditioned by compelled labour.

Just as the Chinese letters momentarily presented Western consumers with the spectral vision of an unfree life, the labour conditions Xu experienced raise similar questions, in this case relentlessly rather than momentarily. Like those letters, Xu’s poems reproduce the same uncanny images of the worker as an object, a machine, a corpse, a double, or between as

sleep and wakefulness. Rather than take the form of an encounter with a ‘free’ version of himself in the consumer, the Other he experiences is, tragically, his own self, one who could not lead a free life. In encountering and not identifying with his own self, the poems’ voice acts as both a narrator and the role he distances himself from, an uncanny doubling that Brecht identifies as generating an ‘alienating effect’ that forces the audience, in this case the reader, towards a politicised consciousness (Brecht, 1964: 191).

The people who wrote the Chinese letters achieved some agency in breaking through the agnotology of the global spectacle by estranging their readers from their usual consumption habits. Xu seemed to have similar ambitions for his poetry which, although intended for a specifically Chinese readership, gained a global one. His drive to make his working life visible is stated as much in his finest work, ‘I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron’, a poem that is an act of refusal. Rather than continue repressing the conditions of his life and work, his poem metaphorically regurgitates them into the public sphere, revealing what he was forced to swallow and keep down. The narrator, after swallowing industrial sewage, unemployment documents, workers who died young, and ‘a life covered in rust’, states: ‘I can’t swallow any more/All that I’ve swallowed is now gushing out of my throat/Unfurling on the land of my ancestors/Into a disgraceful poem’ (Nao, 2014).

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