

# Marx's theory of commodity fetishism philosophy essay

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We are surrounded by objects which have (at least potentially) the status of commodities, but what is this status and how does it relate to social life? This article will explore the most famous and influential response to this question: Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. This is not a theory which exists in a void. Commodity fetishism is central to Marx's account of alienation and hence to his ethical critique of capitalist society, as well as to his structural theory of the functioning of capitalism. It is, according to Marx, the most universal expression of capitalism. Hence, in understanding capitalism, it is useful to look again at commodity fetishism. To make a fetish of something is to treat it as if it has powers which, at least on its own merit, it lacks. As we shall see, this does not mean that a fetish is a simple illusion.

Nevertheless, in commodity fetishism, commodities – physical objects which are bought and sold – are taken to have a characteristic they do not in themselves have. As early as the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx argued that the products of labour tend to escape people's control in capitalist society, leaving people estranged from the products of their own creative activity. In *Capital*, Marx takes this argument further, arguing that the 'fantastic form' of commodities is the basis for alienation. Commodities in capitalism take on a second, additional set of characteristics alongside their physical characteristics as items with certain properties and uses. While their 'use-values' and physical attributes are not mysterious, commodities also take on characteristics of inherent exchangeability which are quite alien to their physical nature. Furthermore, their values are not, according to Marx, set arbitrarily; they come about systematically, seeming to be natural attributes of commodities. Such values are real, but not inherent to commodities. This

equivalence is the trick of commodity fetishism, for the objects related as commodities are not inherently equivalent - they have different uses, different sizes, heights, masses and so on. Thus, commodity fetishism renders very different kinds of commodities equivalent. Commodities can be bought and sold for exchange-values which are quantifiable - they appear as numbers (prices). It is this equivalence which makes exchange possible. According to Marx, since their relations are not arbitrary, this means they must have an attribute in common through which they are compared. Capitalism is unusual among social systems: while all systems connect incommensurable activities, capitalism alone does so by rendering such activities equivalent. This primacy of equivalence is one of the reasons the currently fashionable view of capitalism as absolutely deterritorialised is flawed. For capitalism to function, the huge range of different objects which can exist as commodities must be reduced to a single, reductive scheme of equivalence, by means of command. Money, the universal equivalent, functions in this field as a master-signifier, as argued by Jean-Joseph Goux. In other words, money integrates the social field, rendering the other objects equivalent. Once established, it allows effective economic coordination without any kind of decision-making, either democratic or authoritarian, at the level of the entire system (as opposed to the specific company or enterprise). Commodities serve as the link between people and thus allow the allocation of people and things to social production without any kind of planning. The attribute Marx thinks that commodities have in common, which allows them to systematically attain value, is that they express the 'congealed' labour of workers. Exchange-values ultimately follow from the

amount and type of socially-defined labour that goes into making a commodity. Of course, this simply moves the problem, because labour, like produced goods, is actually diverse and not comparable. Labour is made comparable by reducing it to one and only one of its many characteristics: the characteristic of being abstract human labour-power. Once the value of labour has been imposed, it makes sense that it could be expressed in the value of commodities. Hence, commodity fetishism is only possible in a social system where labour is socialised. The treatment of all labour as socially equivalent rests on a process of abstraction which not only ignores differences among types of work, but also silences the life-experiences of workers. Workers are formally related through the commodity-form only indirectly, in their contracts with bosses and not their relations with other workers. In practice, of course, workers are engaged in socialised production. Capitalism is ultimately imposed on society only by means of violence – known as subsumption, or accumulation-by-dispossession. People are forced into wage-labour by the destruction of other social forms such as subsistence economies, and a continuing violence to prevent such alternatives from re-emerging. Some people constantly challenge this coercion into capitalist work by strategies such as 'autoreduction' and 'dole autonomy', and capitalism seeks to suppress such challenges by renewed violence. Also, there are constant struggles over the wage capitalists have to concede to workers in return for imposing the commodity-form, both directly as payments and as a social wage, such as the welfare state. Capitalist society is simultaneously individualist at an ideological level, and coercively collectivist in its underlying functioning. In commodity fetishism, people

appear independent, but in fact are highly dependent on the world of commodities, which for instance, can take away people's jobs due to changing prices or demand. Hence, commodity fetishism masks what is in fact a social compulsion and a distribution of work. Indeed, it masks the fact that, far from being free producers selling their labour, people are subject to a kind of forced work. It conceals both the interdependence of people in capitalism and the coerced nature of their organisation. As a result, it integrates people both vertically - as workers subordinated to bosses - and horizontally - distributed among different work tasks - without creating direct horizontal relations among producers at the level of the system itself. Instead, each worker is subordinate to the world of things, which embodies the integrative force of the entire system. Furthermore, it is through the commodity-form that the illusion is created that capital can reproduce itself, that investing money in something can produce more money - a step which should be impossible in an equivalential system. This supposedly self-expanding money is only possible because the commodity-form disguises the exploitation of workers. Commodity fetishism creates ideological boundaries between what can be seen and what cannot. Marx argues that commodity fetishism makes relations which actually occur between workers and capitalists, the producers of commodities, appear to be relations between the 'things' which are produced. Commodity fetishism is in particular the means by which the role of workers in production is disguised. Capitalist accounts don't talk much about workers or producers as a distinct group, but producers are able to appear in capitalist accounts as owners of commodities, for instance, as people hired to sell their labour. The second

set of characteristics of commodities arise from the fact that they portray characteristics of work as characteristics of the product of work. Through the movement of commodities, labour becomes invisible. For instance, products seem to appear in supermarkets as if by magic, put there by a process of labour and transport which remains invisible. Marx believes that this peculiar invisibility of labour only arises in capitalist society - it did not occur in earlier societies, however class-divided these may have been, and would disappear in any future alternative society. As Billig argues, this invisibility makes possible enjoyment of capitalist consumption by hiding exploitative conditions of production. Demystification of the ideological nature of commodities is necessary, but not sufficient, to destroy capitalism.

Ultimately, commodity fetishism could be destroyed only if the entire form of society of which it is the integrative pole is transformed. In commodity fetishism, people have an experience of being controlled by the activities and movements of inanimate objects. For instance, people are compelled or bribed to move between jobs by the changing relative values of different commodities. This is not a matter of false consciousness. People are in fact pressured from outside, people do in fact buy commodities for money, and phenomena such as commodity exchange-value actually exist socially. This pressure does not actually come from commodities, but commodities act as the way in which the pressure appears. In capitalist society, the only way people can affect other people's productive activity is indirectly, through changes in the relations among commodities. In Gerry Cohen's account, the illusion is not in assuming that commodities have value, but in believing that this value is an attribute of commodities. Commodities do in fact have value,

but only as a result of social relations; they do not have it in themselves. Hence, commodities are socially constructed: they have a status which is real in its effects, but which is a matter of status being assigned to them, much like putting someone in an official uniform. In many ways, people in capitalism are in the worst of both worlds: individualised enough to be denied social support, and yet vulnerable to external forces over which they have no individual control. This creates the 'possessive individualist' type of subjectivity - ostensibly free, yet also 'responsible' to imperatives derived from impersonal forces and relations among things (to be employable, wise with investments, credit-worthy and so on). A fetish is an 'appearance', but not an illusion. Unlike an illusion, it doesn't vanish once someone realises it is an appearance. It does, however, conceal the underlying reality, which, once recognised, makes commodities cease to be mysterious. An appearance in this sense is distinct from the underlying essence or reality, which occurs at the level of the social relations which create the appearance. Authors such as Bertell Ollman and Michael Billig argue that Marx's account implies a kind of collective forgetfulness in capitalism: the system looks natural and unchangeable because the contestable social relations on which it is based are concealed. This concealment is sustained by habit. In many ways, fetishism is less an illusion than a founding belief which is necessary for an entire social order to function. Commodities have value only because people in general act as if they do. Nevertheless, people are forced to continue to act as if they do - even if they see through the mystification - for as long as they remain trapped in the system based on this assumption. Hence, fetishism is a way of organising social relations and not only an

ideological perception of them. According to Massimo di Angelis, whereas capitalists see fetishism as objectivity, workers experience it as a process whereby their activity is turned into objects. Di Angelis argues that commodity fetishism is basic to a 'class understanding of economics', providing the basis for understanding exploitation and capital. Only through the medium of commodity fetishism is labour rendered an activity for others, and hence exploited. More broadly, commodity fetishism can be seen as entailing 'reification', the misrepresentation of social relations and processes (becoming) as fixed things (being). The Hungarian Marxist George Lukacs argues that commodity fetishism is the matrix from which other kinds of reification spring. From the initial reification stem a whole range of others, from misrecognising political relations of domination as laws and institutions, to imagining people's situated social action to be the result of innate character-traits. This interpretation of Marx reaches its apex in the work of John Holloway, for whom the replacement of doing with being is the key dimension of capitalist oppression. For Holloway, every rejection of the separation of ourselves from our agency is a form of rebellion against capitalism, a rebellion which is, in the first instance, the negation of this separation. Baudrillard argues that sign-value is now more important than use-value in creating commodities. Designer brands aren't worth more because they're more useful, but because of the social status they give or the impressions they convey. In his 1970s work, Negri argued that the law of value has stopped working. The reason for this is that there is too much unpaid labour, as a lot of social activity outside the workplace is now productive - think for instance of housework and childcare, which are



normally unpaid, but are vital to the reproduction of capitalism. Of course, commodities still have values, but Negri thinks they increasingly have values which are arbitrarily assigned to them, rather than derived systematically from similar characteristics of labour. As a result, value is imposed by command rather than exchange. This might not be a big change, since as we saw above, the value of labour from which commodity values derive was already imposed by command.