

The influential theory
commodity fetishism
cultural studies essay



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Introduction This paper will focus on one of the most significant theoretical pillars of the influential theory: commodity fetishism. Marx asserts that social reality under capitalism presents itself in a way that confuses the people who settle it. For Marx, economists, like all other persons in the world of capitalist, are not capable of realising the inner system in capitalism because they are limited to an experience of "the appearance forms" of political market which lead them to deficiency in theoretical accounts. This insight into the theoretical lack of other economists encouraged Marx to demonstrate, what he thought to be, the inner workings of capitalism, and why they are out of sight from individuals in capitalist society.

Literature Analysis Commodity fetishism refers to the transformation of human relations formed from the exchange of commodities in the market. The human relations that form among people as they trade in goods and services in the market are expressed in terms of the objectified economic relations among currency and goods and the consumers and producers. Therefore, commodity fetishism has the ability to transform the individual, conceptual aspects of financially viable value into objective and real things that people think have intrinsic value (Rubin, 1990, 5). Karl Marx is the main proponent of commodity fetishism. Marx states that it is a social relation between people that assumes, in their eyes, the form of a relation between things. Commodity fetishism is, therefore, religious. This is because it involves a belief in something that assumes a supernatural status. According to Karl Marx, fetishes do arise from commodity-producing societies due to one major reason (Wells, 1981, 46). Since man uses their brains to create commodities from raw materials, each product acquires a life of its own. The commodities enter relationships with each other and man as well. Fetishism attaches itself

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to the products of labour while it is produced as commodities. However, it should be noted that there is no relationship between the physical nature of a commodity and the commodity form and the relation of the products of labour in term of value that go into the production of the commodity (Pietz, 1985, 5). Essentially, man endows certain qualities in a commodity such that it acquires a life and status of its own, holding a special meaning in the relations between people and the products they produce. The word fetish derives from the Latin *facticius* ("artificial") and *facere* ("to make"). A fetish can be defined as an object that is believed to contain mystical powers or an artificial object that has power over others.

Fundamentally, fetishism is the attribution of value which is inherited or powers to an object. Essentially, fetishism is the endowment of unique characteristic of an object such that the object holds power of some sort over others or the people who subscribe to them. Commodities are defined as things that are bought and sold in a social system of exchange. The concept of commodity culture is intricately allied with the idea that we construct our identities through the consumer products that inhabit our lives. The idea of a commodity culture has been described by media theorist Stuart Ewen as a commodity self. He believes that we are constructed through our relationship with and use of commodities in our everyday lives (Himmelweit & Mohun, 1981, 75). Karl Marx believes that a fetish is an ordinary object which has been given a type of mystical power that consequently makes it more valuable within a consumer society. In the work of Marx and Freud the term 'fetishism' is used to identify a misunderstanding of the world in which properties are attributed to objects that can only correctly be attributed to human beings. The use of the term allows them to connect these

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misunderstandings to a pre-humanistic scheme in which spirits, sometimes residing within material objects, were treated as a significant part of the ontological order of the world. Their use of the terms 'fetish' and 'fetishism' continue a tradition of cultural critique with its origins in commentary on religious practices surrounding objects. To identify a fetish is to expose the inadequate beliefs of those who revere it for what they believe it is capable of, by pointing to the real, material, qualities of the object and identifying its presumed capacities as really residing elsewhere - in the 'true' god; in human labour; in arousal by a person of the opposite sex. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts Marx uses the term 'fetish-worshippers' to describe the supporters of the monetary and mercantile system and how they looked upon private property (Dant, 1996, 6). Following Engels, he compares the fetishism of the mercantilists to that revealed by Luther's critique of the paganism and external religiosity of Catholicism. The objects of private property stand in for real human relations and so appear to have a power that is their own whereas the political economists' critique shows that human labor is the essence of private property. Of course Marx goes on to criticize the political economists for not identifying the contradictory essence of private property as the product of alienated labor. Whereas in proto-anthropology the term 'fetish' referred to the cultural meanings and uses of certain objects, in Marx's account the term is used to criticize more general beliefs about capitalist culture. Nothing specific than 'private property' in general is identified as the fetish object. Nevertheless, later in the Manuscripts Marx does specify metal money as a fetish, referring to the dazzle of its "sensuous glitter" (Marx 1975: 364). The fetished exchange establishes a fantastic relationship between things that obscures the real

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relationship between people - workers whose labor produces things of value to others. The cultural forms which incorporate such 'fantasies', mistaking them for reality, are critiqued by Marx in his analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. Marx distinguishes the use-value of objects from their exchange-value. Use-values are to do with the quality of objects and are only realized in use or consumption whereas exchange values are quantifiable in terms of other commodities (Marx 1976: 126-128). Baudrillard (1981: 130-4) points out that Marx restricts his analysis of commodity fetishism to exchange-value whilst use-value remains "an abstraction" a residual category, prior to and outside the economic relations of socially assigned value, of equivalence and of quantity.

ConclusionThe term fetishism can refer to the relative quality of desire and fascination for an object that is not intrinsic but is nonetheless part of it. The reverence shown for its capacities supplements its material form, showing what it means how it is valued in its cultural context. For instance, the fetish quality of cars, works of art, mobile 'phones, shirts and Italian food is not an intrinsic or stable quality of the object. It is assigned through cultural mediations, a circulation of signs, including the objects themselves. It is realized through a worshipful consumption of the objects in which reverence is displayed through desire for and an enthusiastic use of the object's capacities. The fetishistic quality of objects varies over time and place and between different groups of people. This is a fetishism of objects that does not distinguish their unreality from an essential material, natural or normal reality but recognizes, at both the material and semiotic levels, the fetish as a cultural production, a work of humans that is as real as anything can be.