

Karl marx and
commodity fetishism
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Commodity fetishism, the gambit with which Marx opens his masterpiece *Capital*, is one of the most crucial aspects of Marx's approach to economics, politics and society. While it has prompted debates over whether it refers to petty commodity production or only to fully-developed capitalist societies, its basic structure is central to Marxist approaches across the board, from structuralism to Marxist-humanism to autonomia. It is thus important to examine the reasons for the centrality of the concept of Marx's theory. This essay will explain the meaning of the term 'commodity fetishism' and situate it in Marx's theory of commodities, before exploring various of its economic and political implications. It will thus show the importance of the concept as a basic matrix of social relations in Marx's theory with wide-ranging effects on other parts of his theory.

It is important firstly to examine what is meant by the term 'commodity fetishism'. 'To make a fetish of something', suggests G. A. Cohen, 'is to invest it with powers it does not in itself have'. Commodity fetishism is 'the mysteriousness of the equivalent form', in which 'the relationships between the producers... take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour'. As Ollman argues, commodity fetishism portrays a 'human drama' in terms of the 'activities of inanimate objects'. The human drama is really a question of the role of labour in production, which is systematically elided in everyday understandings of commodities.

This theory expands Marx's theory of alienation, explaining how things seem to escape people's control. However, it is not simply a matter of false consciousness. People experience themselves as being controlled by the movements (for instance, the changing relative values) of objects,

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movements which are entirely outside their own control. Commodities in fact move without will, foreknowledge or actions of people, changing their values. This is actually because in capitalist society, people can influence others' productive activity only through the mediation of things. On the basis of fetishism, an objective world of relations among things (such as market prices) actually comes into being. The commodity fetish is the matrix of capitalist social relations.

The commodity appears to be the elementary form of the wealth of society in capitalism. As Rubin argues, social producers do not appear in capitalism as producers but as owners of commodities. For Marx, commodity fetishism is inseparable from the commodity-form. The idea of the commodity seems simple, but on close inspection is found to be 'abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'. Commodities take on a 'fantastic form' in which they carry 'suprasensible or social' characteristics along with their physical nature, akin to the features attributed to religious entities. This echoes Marx's broader theory of ideology in which reality appears upside-down. This enigmatic character arises from the commodity-form, and not from use-values or the origin of commodities in labour. 'The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves'. Hence, in today's context, items appear 'like magic' in shopping malls only because of an entire invisible process of labour and transport. Only in capitalist society is the labour expended in producing an item deemed a property of the item.

The 'magic and necromancy' of commodities are specific to capitalism and vanish in other forms of production.

Commodities become fetishes because of their exchangeability. There is nothing mysterious in use-values, but commodities are mysterious because they change their attributes and in Marx's terms, stand on their heads and seem to think for themselves. What is mysterious for Marx is the ability for quite different kind of objects to be exchanged as if they were equivalent, with definite, apparently objective magnitudes of value. It is nevertheless the case that commodities are exchanged for definite values, which for Marx shows that there must be a quantifiable attribute they contain or express. This is particularly the case since values are not set arbitrarily but seem to come about systematically; within the value-relation, value is a natural attribute. Further, value is a matter of relation, since the value of any one object can be measured only relative to other objects. Commodities thus stand in relation to a whole series of other commodities, as part of a common social world.

Commodities appear to be external objects which satisfy needs or use-values, either directly or as means of production. They also appear to have an exchange-value, which is what the object will sell or exchange for. This is a real attribute, but not an inherent one. The labour congealed in a commodity is materially different from the commodity but is an attribute of it when (and only when) it is in the value-relation. The object which becomes a commodity thus counts for more in the relation than outside it, because of a social status attached to it. Exchange-value actually arises from the amount of labour (taken as a quality of abstract labour) which is expressed in a <https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-and-commodity-fetishism-analysis-philosophy-essay/>

commodity. Commodities are 'congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour'. The substance of value is labour and its measure is labour-time. It is because they express the same kind of socially-defined labour that commodities are the same at the level of composition, and hence can be expressed as equivalents, even though their physical formation is different. This process in turn rests on treating all labour as equivalent via a process of abstraction. This brackets not only the different types of labour, but also workers' life-experiences, and hence is politically important. Di Angelis argues that experiences of commodity fetishism vary between capitalists and workers: capitalists experience fetishism as objectivity, whereas workers experience it as a process of reification.

Is commodity fetishism a matter of appearance or reality? For Marx, a fetish is an appearance, but not simply an illusion which disappears with awareness of its mystified nature. Commodity fetishism is on the one hand absurd when formulated as a statement, and on the other is how relations actually appear or come into being, so that for instance, the forms of 'bourgeois' economics are accurate as long as capitalism persists. The 'vulgar' economist as 'fetish-worshipper' can be condemned for accepting an appearance as something real. On many occasions, Marx does treat fetishism as a misrepresentation in the sense that believing that exchange-value inheres in commodities is an analytical mistake. Hence for instance, money is mysterious and dazzling, and demystifying the commodity form makes this mystery disappear. It is also suggested that people in fact equate their particular labours as equivalent human labour, but are unaware of doing so. Commodity fetishism 'conceals' social relations 'instead of

revealing them plainly'. It is something which has ' misled' economists.

Similarly, the critical gesture Marx performs consists in asking why labour is expressed in value, rather than simply accepting that it is, as if it were a natural law. Those (such as Ricardo) who believe it is a natural law are thus fooling themselves.

This model of fetishism as appearance serves as a theory of ideology. As Ollman argues, fetishism arises because the essence of value, the social relations which make the exchange of equivalents possible, is mistaken for its appearance. It has the effect of imposing ' blanket ignorance' of capitalist society, especially when extended into broader reification. This kind of fetishism protects capitalism by making it seem natural and eternal and by covering up relations of exploitation. Billig argues that Marx's analysis ' contains an implicit psychology of collective amnesia' and derives from it a theory of ' shared repression' which sustains consumerism, while di Angelis terms it the link between the materiality of capitalist social relations and how these are cognitively apprehended, a bridge between relations and the capitalist perspective. Eagleton has termed this a ' dissembling or duplicity built into the very economic structures of capitalism'. Its source appears to be habit. As exchange-rates among commodities stabilise, their value comes to seem inherent to them as objects, though it remains, of course, a socially-constructed expression of social relations. Hence, custom and habit sustain the fetishist illusion.

On the other hand, fetishism is a socially effective appearance to the extent that people actually do buy and sell commodities for money; this does not

stop happening because one ceases to believe that commodities have
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inherent exchange-value. In this sense, it is not a mere misrepresentation but something more akin to a founding myth, a falsity necessary for the actual functioning of a set of social relations. This can be read as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Ollman argues, the powers attributed to things become socially effective because people in general act as if they are effective. Marx may, however, have had in mind a more Hegelian model in which appearances or phenomena are the external forms of essences and not simply representations of them, with duplicity built into reality rather than how it is seen. Hence, the commodity is the form of appearance of labour, in the sense of a 'mode of expression', a way in which it is expressed in a particular social system. In a capitalist society, the products of labour in fact 'assume the form' of commodities. The scientific discovery of the basis of value in labour does not eliminate the mystified form of expression, which continues to be 'ultimately valid' for 'those caught up in the relations of commodity production' regardless of their awareness of the mystified basis of these relations. Relations among commodities continue to assert themselves as if they were a natural law. This is because commodity fetishism is not simply a way of viewing, but also a way of organising social relations, through which production is not simply represented but actualised. Hence, a fetish is not simply an illusion. In Cohen's terms, it is more like a mirage than a hallucination, being a power wrongly perceived in a particular place but which does in fact exist. Expressing this situation in clear analytical terms, Cohen suggests it means that things do have exchange value, but do not have it autonomously; the illusion is simply that they appear to have it autonomously. Individuals cannot simply choose to reject the mystification,

in the manner of Stirner's spooks, since the 'form of appearance' remains socially operative. This is because commodity fetishism expresses the relations of people involved in alienated labour. Hence, ideology is inseparable from the material base; as Callinicos argues, capitalism as a social system 'produces its own misperception'. It is also, crucially, a socially effective illusion, which as Billig argues, sustains routines of consumption by creating the possibility for enjoyment in the elision of conditions of production. Ultimately, it is imposed at a social level by means of violence, a process Marx terms subsumption. Hence, capitalist laws have regularity, but these laws 'are only those which capital succeeds in imposing'. It is thus subject to constant struggles over 'whether, how much, and at what price the commodity-form will be imposed'.

In examining the centrality of commodity fetishism to Marxist economics and politics, one can firstly note its role in establishing equivalence among objects. Commodity fetishism is necessary for the construction of equivalence without which exchange would be impossible. Indeed, it is fundamentally connected to the reduction of the social world to calculable and subdividable processes. Every form of social production integrates qualitatively different forms of activity, but capitalism is unusual in doing this by rendering activities equivalent. Hence, as Cohen puts it, capital 'turns quality into quantity'. Equivalence creates an endless chain of commodities which can be exchanged for one another, arranged in effect into a social world. This quilting or denumerating function of money has led to its being theorised as a master-signifier within capitalism, an integrative pole around which social order is constructed.

One of the most crucial economic implications Marx draws from his theory of commodity fetishism is its co-constitutivity with capitalism. Commodity fetishism is a form of determination of capitalism, dependent on a fully developed system of commodity exchange which exists only in capitalism. According to Marx, commodity fetishism bears 'the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite'. The 'value-form of the product of labour' is the most universal expression of the capitalist mode of production as a 'historical and transitory' stage. It is 'the most general and the most undeveloped form of bourgeois production'. Indeed, commodity fetishism disappears in any form of production other than capitalism, and does not arise for instance in subsistence production, collective production or feudalism. Commodity fetishism is also closely related to the exploitation of labour. Value requires that labour be reduced to one of its attributes, that of being abstract human labour. This reduction depends on a 'directly social form' of labour, in which labour in fact becomes quantifiable; without such a form of labour, it could not provide a basis for exchange. It thus only becomes fully visible in capitalist society, where 'the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities'.

Commodity fetishism also has the effect of allowing economic coordination at a social level without reliance on communitarian or authoritarian planning or decisions. Capitalism generates commodity fetishism because it establishes relations between individual workers and total social labour only through the medium of exchange. Through the commodity-form, workers not only relate to their products as objects with inherent value, but also relate to

the 'sum total of labour' as something external. This is because each producer is connected, by what Rubin terms a 'thick network of indirect production relations', to the whole of society by means such as the impact of social activities on prices. The formally independent producer nevertheless 'depends on the market' and hence 'depends on the productive activity of all other members of society'. The individual producer who produces for sale is contributing to the total social labour by producing use-values, but meets her or his own needs from the product of the total social labour only through the medium of exchange. Workers are pitted against each other through atomisation. Commodity fetishism also provides the organic link between the reality of class struggle and the fetishised categories of bourgeois thought. The products of labour are actually produced by the social character of labour, but this social character is concealed and mystified by construing it through the medium of relations among commodities.

Hence, as Ollman argues, commodity fetishism is an effect of the rendering of products of labour as 'the abstract product of alienated labour'. In Cohen's terms, mystery arises in commodity fetishism because the social character of production is expressed in exchange, and is not apparent in production. People are given social power in the form of a thing, in lieu of direct social ties. Hence, while people seem independent of each other, they are actually highly mutually dependent by means of commodities. Cleaver states that fetishism 'masks... compulsion' and that capitalism is based on forced work concealed by the commodity-form. Massimo di Angelis similarly argues that commodity fetishism relies on the creation of a particular class relation of work as imposed, alienated and boundless, while Meszaros argues

that commodity fetishism turns workers into things because it rests on treating labour as a commodity. Lukacs similarly takes Marx to view commodity fetishism as arising ultimately from the reduction of labour-power to a commodity. Commodity fetishism is thus an information-disguising function which conceals interdependence, and hides the human and social effects of production and consumption, detaching desires and their satisfaction from social life.

Similarly, Rubin views the genesis of commodity fetishism in the split between individual production or private ownership and the social distribution of products, such that the individual owners do not really choose what to make but rather, are directed by social forces. Commodity fetishism is a means whereby, in the absence of social planning, labour and resources are allocated to social production; the capitalist and worker are forced to regulate their productive activity in advance, in line with market conditions, which is to say, with social production. It organises production relations, 'serving as a connecting link between people'. Hence, exchange serves as the social form of appearance of the production process. In Cohen's terms, '[w]hen production is not ab initio social an illusiogenic market is required to link men's labours behind their backs'. Hence, 'labour time takes the form of exchange value... only because producers are fragmented'. The result is that both horizontal and vertical integration of labour are achieved without horizontal connections being made between producers: horizontal relations are mediated by the relations among things, which relate vertically to each producer.

Another reason for its centrality is that commodity fetishism is the matrix of reification, from which other misrecognitions or structural distortions in capitalist relations occur, for instance the view of capital as producing a profit, or of machines (rather than capitalists) exploiting workers. It creates an entire 'enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world' in which capital, land, abstract labour and the like perform 'ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as things'. Hence, for Lukacs for instance, the theory of commodity fetishism is the central, structural problem of capitalist society from which can be derived all the objective and subjective forms of this society. It can even be used to derive broader forms of misrecognition or reification in which aspects of society, from laws and institutions to character-attributes of individuals, are treated as natural instead of as social constructs. With society fragmented by reification, it becomes difficult to grasp as a totality. The theory of commodity fetishism suggests that the entire process of reification can be derived from the basic unit of capitalist wealth.

The theory of commodity fetishism is also important in redefining the task of economics. Marx observes that classical political economists do not recognise the distinction between use-value and exchange-value. This is also true of neoclassical economics, which uses ideas of utility and preferences to aggregate both concepts. The view that capitalism is not the best of all possible worlds, derived partly from his view of commodity fetishism as a mystification of forced work, puts Marx at odds with most political economists, whom he views as uncritical and 'vulgar', floundering around within the categories a social form without recognising its contingency, and

glorifying its internal characteristics as natural laws. Indeed, it provides a basis for Marxist economics as a distinct approach, creating criteria for its contrast with other economic approaches. The emphasis on labour also shifts the gaze of the economist from exchange, still treated even today as the engine of growth by most economists, to the production process and in particular the situation of workers within it. On an analytical level, the theory of commodity fetishism implies a theoretical imperative always to put phenomena in their social, or class, context. It redirects economics from being a part-naturalistic approach, towards a sociological view of the economy as emanating entirely from society.

Some authors also maintain that much of Marx's economic theory is elaborated from his theory of commodity fetishism. For instance, de Angelis views commodity fetishism as being 'at the basis of a class understanding of economics'. This is because commodity fetishism is central to the exploitation of labour and the extraction of capital. In order to produce a commodity, not only does labour need to be put into it, but the labour must be 'for others', transferred to others through exchange. Capital is also an effect of the matrix of reification. Capital appears to be 'money creating more money, self-expanding value', which in an equivalential system is impossible. It is only because of the illusion involved in commodity fetishism that the illusion of self-reproducing capital can operate, because without it, capital accumulation would immediately be seen as exploitation. Because labourers relate dyadically to the fetishised world of commodities, the surplus production arising from the horizontal integration or combination of labour is disguised, and appears to accrue from capital. Marx also takes

capitalism to have certain essential characteristics which are invariant in capitalist societies, the commodity-form constituted by commodity fetishism being primary among these. This is crucial to ideas such as inherent tendencies of capitalism and the irreducibility of crisis.

In terms of political significance, commodity fetishism has substantial effects on subjectivity, creating a particular kind of atomised subject which is simultaneously desocialised and vulnerable to external forces. The result is a 'possessive individual' defined through a double-bind of freedom with responsibilities to requirements apparently imposed by things (for instance, of prudence and dispassionateness). This type of subjectivity is crucial to Marxist attempts to discuss political theory and ethics in capitalist society, which start from Marx's approach of demystifying relations. In Marxist theory, this is counterposed to a relational account of subjectivity derived from Marx's work. This distinction is only thinkable in the frame derived from commodity fetishism.

Another political effect is to emphasise ideology over self-presence in understanding what otherwise appears to be consent in political life. Paul Ricoeur has called the concept of commodity fetishism 'crucial for a theory of ideology'. The idea of commodity fetishism, and the assumption of widespread mystification, precludes consent models of politics, implying the assumption that compliance is illegitimate. Rather, 'science' as demystification of ideology is taken to be necessary to recognise social reality. This process of demystification has to go behind appearances to get at the social relations beneath. It rests on a distinction between appearance and reality, providing instructions as to how to carry out research without

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being drawn into dominant illusions. This approach constructs a model of the privileged awareness of the Marxist as theorist, who gains epistemological privilege over the ignorant masses as well as the 'bourgeois' scholars. The defeat of false consciousness becomes a precondition for the exercise of consent or informed choice. This Marxist position can be viewed either as a necessary precondition for critique or as a dangerous precursor of a dictatorship by experts.

Another effect of the theory is the openness to alternative futures which arises from viewing fetishism as a social construct. The commodity-status of objects is a social construction which attaches additional attributes to them, likened by Marx to giving a person more value by putting them in a uniform or giving them a title such as 'your majesty', which is to say, by giving them social status. The quality of being a commodity 'is as much men's social product as their language', and is basically a kind of encoded hieroglyphics. Hence, an idea such as natural price is 'as irrational as a yellow logarithm': price cannot by definition be natural. It therefore follows that neither exchange-value nor the status of being a commodity is inherent to objects, but rather, is completely socially constructed, relative to a particular social form. This is important because Marx is not a pervasive social-constructivist at an ontological level; he implicitly distinguishes between real, albeit relational, aspects of objects and entirely socially constructed aspects. Hence for instance, commodity fetishism is fantastic in a way that the visual perception of objects, though similarly based on a form of appearance, is not: the seen object is not the same as the actual object, but relates to its

real characteristics, whereas the fetishised characteristics of the commodity bear no relation to its physical nature.

From the social constructedness of commodities, it follows that economics cannot be a science in the naturalistic sense, since it is not in fact concerned with material properties of objects, but rather, with concealed social relations. The fact that these concealed relations express themselves in forms which are nevertheless socially actual and not simply imaginary necessitates the development of a critical approach to economics able simultaneously to theorise underlying social relations and their expression through commodities as forms of appearance. It implies that such relations are relative to a social form and as such, can be changed along with this social form. It therefore follows that they must be subjected to the full weight of critique in terms of whether they should be retained as social relations. To derive Marx's entire theory of revolution and communism, one needs much more than his theory of commodity fetishism, including such elements as his theory of historical teleology and his assumptions regarding the emergence of social classes. The co-constitutivity of commodity fetishism and capitalism also lead to two conclusions important for the argument for revolution: firstly that commodity fetishism is historically constructed, not natural, and can be overcome through social transformation; and secondly that, being fundamental to the existing system as a totality, it can only be overcome through thoroughgoing transformation. There is also an implied ethical ground for such transformation in its contrast with the muddied waters of fetishism. When things which need to be related are not related directly, the effect is indirect relation through a field of illusion. By implication, this

situation can be rectified by returning to directness or transparency, which is implicitly taken to be desirable.

A final concern should be noted. In presenting commodity fetishism as the matrix of capitalist relations, Marx pursues a structurally abstract Hegelian procedure of deducing processes from their essential forms. This attracts criticism for deflecting attention from the more explicitly relational derivation of phenomena from class struggle. Hence, Cleaver argues that the mode of exposition in Marx's discussion of the commodity leaves him open to misinterpretation, since he treats it in abstraction from capitalism. Negri goes further, accusing Marx of adding 'abstraction and confusion' in the passage from Grundrisse to Capital, adding an inappropriately Hegelian schema which makes less clear the basic point: that value is mystified and that commodities do not have autonomous value. Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism, like much of his theory, treads a fine line between structural and agential approaches to capitalism, and the concept thus carries the ambiguity of Marx's position in this regard.

To conclude, therefore, commodity fetishism is central to Marx's theory of capitalism because it serves as a basic matrix from which atomisation, reification and capitalist power can be derived as social effects. Its characteristics are somewhat mixed, because it is at once a matter of misunderstanding and of structurally operative distortions. In many ways, it expresses the appearance of labour only after it is subordinated to capitalist command, and as such, is a way of papering over the process of subsumption itself. It is also, however, a way of seeing which constitutes much if not all of the capitalist frame as a perspective on social reality. It <https://assignbuster.com/karl-marx-and-commodity-fetishism-analysis-philosophy-essay/>

should thus be seen as a way of getting inside the structures of the capitalist social unconscious, which determine the way in which society operates if and only if it is successfully subsumed into this particular frame.