

## REIFICATION AND COMMODITY FETISHISM REVISITED

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I propose to bring the issue of "commodity fetishism" and "reification" into conceptual and historical focus by analyzing the concepts as they originally occur in Marx's writings and by identifying some problems. My argument is that the doctrines of commodity fetishism and, to some extent, reification are familiar but problematical ideas in Marx's own terms. Specifically, there are problems with the adequacy of Marx's explanation of the occurrence of commodity fetishism and with his justification of these two doctrines. Nevertheless, attention to the doctrines serves to expose interesting features of Marx's underlying thought, *e.g.*, his assumption of a productive community. I maintain that it is such a premise which has contributed whatever vitality the doctrines have been deemed to have. Furthermore, awareness of some problems facing such doctrines may assist in their reconsideration and possible rehabilitation, even to the point of investing them with new meaning and altered roles in contemporary social theory.

### I

Marx said of *Capital* that with the exception of one chapter, his "volume cannot stand accused on the score of difficulty."<sup>1</sup> The allegedly single difficult chapter was the first containing his analysis of commodities and closing with his doctrine of commodity fetishism. That chapter, Marx confessed, had "coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to [Hegel]."<sup>2</sup> Many supposed that the use of Hegelian expressions exceeded coquetry and thus contributes to the difficulty of the chapter. If that is true, the doctrine of fetishism may be similarly affected.

It is somewhat surprising to stumble upon the section on fetishism. At the end of a chapter which purports to elucidate the nature of a commodity, we meet the claim that a commodity is actually quite mysterious. Some may be inclined to think it is Marx's doctrine of fetishism which is mysterious; others have questioned its relevance to a theory of political economy; and some have

## JOHN P. BURKE

found it inconsistent with part of Marx's theory of value.<sup>3</sup>

"Fetishism" may be taken to mean the attribution of properties, powers, or values to an object which the object does not in fact possess, together with an attitude of interest, respect, awe, or even reverence toward the object. Because of the misattribution, such an attitude can be regarded as "displaced" or "misplaced". For example, one might hold an amulet in some esteem because of its supposed protective properties, or avidly follow bio-rhythm charts and horoscopes in newspapers because of their supposed measuring and predictive powers.

What then does commodity fetishism consist of? Some powers or properties are mistakenly attributed to commodities, but what are they? The mistake that occupied Marx does not concern the physical properties of commodities as things, nor is their use-value — their capacity to satisfy human needs — the source of any mistake. Nor does the fact that commodities are the results of human labor as such make them mysterious.<sup>4</sup>

For Marx, commodity fetishism is an economic exemplification of the more general philosophical problem of appearance *vs.* reality. Marx argues that the "social character" of human labor appears in commodities in a perverted or distorted form, as an objective character of the commodities themselves. This assertion is worth examining. Marx held that common sense views commodities as easily understood but that analysis reveals them as mysterious.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour: because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.<sup>5</sup>

There seem to be two theses asserted in this well-known passage. There is first the "mystery thesis" which asserts that commodities are somehow puzzling. Who finds commodities mysterious? Presumably Marx meant that the readers of his analysis should find them mysterious, for the ordinary person of common sense will find commodities to be "trivial things", "easily understood", and we may assume that Marx himself did not find them ultimately mysterious. Possibly Marx also meant that political economists should have analyzed commodities as he had, and would thereupon discover something mysterious about commodities. Marx did not say whether the analysis to be

## FETISHISM REVISITED

followed is political-economic, metaphysical, or philosophical in some other sense, but the "mystery thesis" is reminiscent of Hegel's procedure in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where apparently well understood forms of experience are subjected to critical analysis to display their defects in order to move on to a more adequate form of experience.

The second thesis may be called the "transposition-distortion thesis" and what it asserts is that the social character of human labor is transposed to commodities, there to appear as an objective character of the commodities themselves, which is a distortion. This second thesis is more important and philosophically interesting than the mystery thesis,<sup>6</sup> and requires analysis.

To exploit the appearance-reality aspect of commodity fetishism, Marx first resorts to an imperfect analogy. "In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself."<sup>7</sup> The reality is nerve stimulation by light; the appearance is an object outside us. The analogy is imperfect, as Marx notes, because in perception light does pass from one physical thing to another and a real physical relationship is involved. In commodities, however, it cannot be held that the social character of labor is physically transposed to them.

Marx thus favours a religious analogy suggested by Feuerbach's philosophy of religion. In the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world ... the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race."<sup>8</sup> For Feuerbach, our religious ideas only *appear* to be about the divine and godly, that which transcends our human secular world. Our religious ideas are really about us, distorted projections of human nature and its potentialities. Theology is really anthropology. The real reference of the products of human thought is the human species; the apparent reference is God; religion and God are actually our creations. Marx merely adds to his one-sentence allusion to Feuerbach's view of religious belief, "So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands."<sup>9</sup>

There is some divergence here. Feuerbach was concerned with the products of our consciousness, Marx speaks of the products of our hands. It is clear, however, why the religious analogy is more congenial to Marx, for he had said the social character of human labor passes to the commodities to re-appear as an objective character of those products. This "social character" is not a physical property anymore than, for Feuerbach, the "human character or significance" of our religious ideas is a physical property.

Feuerbach regarded religious belief as an understandable and rectifiable mistake and commodity fetishism is likewise a mistake for Marx. We perceive commodities in social relationships among themselves whereas only humans

## JOHN P. BURKE

have social relationships. The mistake, understandable and rectifiable, involves a false attitude toward commodities, a misattribution of social properties to things. What is the "social character" of human labor?

Labor has a social character in that 1) as useful labor, it has the capacity to satisfy actual social needs and as such is recognized as part of the collective labor of society. 2) If it is to also satisfy the needs of the individual laborer, the labor must find its place in a social system which acknowledges the "mutual exchangeability of all kinds of useful private labor." Thus labor has a social character provided it is socially useful and socially exchangeable.<sup>10</sup> My sorting of fishing gear in my tackle box or tying up hooks is neither socially useful nor exchangeable. My sorting out or creation of fishing tackle for a company which produces tackle for the market can be both socially useful and exchangeable. For then I produce not only articles of social utility but, on Marx's theory of value, I deposit exchange-value in such commodities by my labor.

Marx, however, must be interpreted as holding that individuals are naive about the social character of their labor and become re-acquainted with it in a modified form when commodities are exchanged. I have called this the transposition-distortion thesis. What is Marx's explanation of this fetishistic phenomenon?

He claims that workers produce commodities as individuals or groups of individuals in relative independence to one another. While the sum total of the individuals' labor is the aggregate labor of society, laborers lack significant social contact during production, thus they are not aware of the social character of their labor as Marx defined it. Workers enjoy some social contact during acts of commodity exchange and thus commodity exchange seems to be the primary arena of social relationships; people exhibit social relationships indirectly as exchangers and consumers.<sup>11</sup> Commodity producers thus view their working activity as "material relations between persons". Presumably this means they have a "reified" conception of their productive activity in the sense that their labor is viewed abstractly, mechanically, matter-of-factly. I discuss "reification" in section II below.

On the other hand, commodity producers, viewing exchange activity, are struck by the appearance of "social relations between things" as commodities in exchange with one another acquire "one uniform social status". Marx believed, on the basis of his labor theory of value, that the commodities actually acquired their "one uniform social status" (exchangeability) during production. The realm of productive activity thus becomes "materialized" (or "reified"), while the realm of commodity exchange becomes "socialized."

Marx's attempted explanation of the fetishism phenomenon runs a little deeper. Over time, social custom tends to stabilize the proportions in which commodities are exchangeable so that such proportions seem to result from the

## FETISHISM REVISITED

intrinsic nature of the commodities as objects. The value character of a commodity, which in reality stems from the social character of labor, appears as an objective character stamped on the commodity itself simply by virtue of certain natural properties. Since the value-character of commodities varies "independently of the will, foresight and action of the producer", the fact (for Marx) that the value-character is ultimately rooted in the social division of labor simply goes unnoticed. "To them [the producers] their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them."<sup>12</sup> Marx seems to be arguing that our attention is fixed so much on the "interaction" and exchanges of numerous different commodities that we come to take commodities as mysterious remarkable repositories of value endowed with a "life" of their own. Marx's "scientific" discovery is that this is to treat commodities fetishistically. Commodities exchange in response to "the labor time socially necessary for their production" which "forcibly asserts itself like an overriding law of Nature."<sup>13</sup>

Thus, commodity fetishism is an illusion peculiar to a commodity-producing society similar to the mercantilist illusion about gold and silver as "natural objects with strange social properties" and the physiocratic illusion about the "natural" rents produced from the soil.

Marx's position raises at least four questions. 1) Are people commodity fetishists? 2) How adequate is his explanation of commodity fetishism? 3) Can his doctrine of commodity fetishism be justified? 4) How serious a problem is commodity fetishism?

1) Asking whether people are commodity fetishists resembles asking whether they are alienated or subject to an ideology. Too often our attention remains rivetted to the familiar terms and concepts of a theory without our bothering to ascertain under what conditions the theory might be true. Is this the sort of theory which can be empirically confirmed? What sorts of observations would be relevant to deciding the truth of the doctrine of commodity fetishism? At the very least, it seems one would have to consult the realm of consumer beliefs and attitudes about commodities and that is a very shadowy, uncharted realm indeed. We could grant Marx that people do not generally consider commodities as endowed with value because of the social character of human labor, but is it in any way clear that they view commodities as having inherent value? It would not be surprising to learn of some cases of gold fetishism, money fetishism, Kruggerand fetishism, or real estate fetishism, but it is simply not evident in general how to go about proving or disproving the proposition, "people are commodity fetishists." I raise the question without offering a decisive answer. There is some reason to leave it an open question for the present until further research on consumer behaviour and on advertising helps fill some of the void of our knowledge about consumer beliefs and attitudes.

## JOHN P. BURKE

2) Marx says far too little to explain the origin of commodity fetishism. In the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* he explains the fetishism in terms of social conventions.

Only the conventions of our everyday life make it appear common-place and ordinary that social relations of production should assume the shape of things, so that the relations into which people enter in the course of their work appear as the relations of things to one another and of things to people. This mystification is still a very simple one in the case of a commodity.<sup>14</sup>

In *Capital*, he explains the fetishism partly in terms of such social customs and partly in terms of the relative isolation of the producers from each other in the course of production. What is the relationship between these two elements of the explanation? Marx offers none.

Marx says "We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it."<sup>15</sup> This explanation, however, does not seem to overcome the notorious difficulty of appearance-reality claims: how can we be led to appreciate that what seems ordinary and well understood is in fact only appearance, and that there is a reality with which we are so far unacquainted? Marx's attempted explanatory remarks must be judged too modest to be convincing.

There is another problem worth mentioning. To help explain the origin of commodity fetishism, Marx stresses the isolation, independence, and relative indifference of the producers to one another. In a later chapter on "Cooperation", in order to help to show that advanced industry is revolutionizing the factory workers, and that cooperative working relationships and social contact among the workers is schooling the working class for socialistic production, Marx stresses the associative character of production.<sup>16</sup> There seems to be an inconsistency; or is it to be believed that workers are privatized enough to become commodity fetishists but socialized enough to become socialist producers?

I need hardly add that accepting Marx's sketch of an explanation seems to commit one to acceptance of his labor theory of value, a theory which evidently cannot be extricated from controversy.

3) Marx's fetishism doctrine has a justification problem akin to that faced by Feuerbach's theory of religion which partially inspired it. How does one justify Feuerbach's assertion that theology is at bottom anthropology? Feuerbach's interpretation of religious beliefs and claims is rich and suggestive, it may even

## FETISHISM REVISITED

be true, but is it anything more than a psychologically persuasive interpretation? Perhaps it is more than that, for Feuerbach based it on a metaphysical theory of the nature and limitations of consciousness as species-consciousness. Just as the highest object for the bird is a winged creature, so the highest object for the human being is the human species. Our consciousness cannot transcend our own species.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Marx does not anchor his fetishism doctrine in a metaphysical theory about species-consciousness. In Marx we have a provocative appearance-reality claim which is largely, if not wholly, parasitic upon the analogy to the Feuerbachian account of religion. I suspect that if we were to delete the allusion to Feuerbach we would be left with a weak and unjustified doctrine of commodity fetishism. However, retaining the Feuerbachian kernel does not seem to improve the doctrine's justifiability.

4) Suppose, however, that we were to grant Marx that people are commodity fetishists, that commodity fetishism arises roughly for the reasons he mentioned, and that some sort of plausible justification can be found for the mystery thesis and the transposition-distortion thesis. So what! How serious a problem is commodity fetishism? First, how serious a problem might Marx think it?

If we hold that the doctrine of commodity fetishism has some metaphysical origin (appearance *vs.* reality, Feuerbach's collapse of theology into anthropology), it seems that it has a *political* rather than a metaphysical point to make. By attributing fetishism to a commodity society, Marx wished to call attention to some peculiarities of that society compared to other societies.<sup>18</sup> Thus the fetishism doctrine is supposed to advance the overall "critique" of capitalist political economy. How is it to do that?

I think its point is to expose to the working class (first, and second to political economists) that their perceptions and attention are anchored too deeply in the exchange process to the detriment of their understanding of the production process. The working class is vitally and immediately involved in the production process. However, the spectacle of capitalist commodity society is such that people's attention is deflected away from their roles as creative, active producers to their roles as exchangers and consumers. When the realm of production is relatively ignored, we miss how production relations reflect the division of labor in that society, its class relationships, and the absence of direct regulation of production by producers. The possibility and desirability of social control of production goes unnoticed.

Furthermore, when we concentrate on exchange and consumption, commodity society may appear as a bare fact, a naturally evolved social order. Capitalist society with its profits on capital appears as merely an exchange society. The exploitation of labor by capital, an exploitation which begins (but

## JOHN P. BURKE

may not end) in the production process is simply missed. Capital itself is viewed as a remarkable "thing" which is just "naturally" fruitful, a thing capable of "earning" and "yielding" a "gain," of being "put to work" wisely or foolishly.<sup>19</sup>

For Marx, capital is no such remarkable thing, it is not even a "thing" at all, but, as he often put it, capital is a social relation. It is the extraction of surplus labor and hence surplus value from the working class by the capitalist class. The fact of such extraction was shrouded, he thought, in the mists of social custom and history. What glitters through such mists for example, is the dazzling "money-form", the apparent capacity of capital as money to simply "bear" interest as naturally and easily as pear trees bear pears.<sup>20</sup>

In Marx's view, capitalist society is not merely a spectacular exchange society or consumer society. The belief that it is yields the ideology of equality according to which the various economic actors confront one another as equal exchangers. "Each of the subjects is an exchanger; *i.e.*, each has the same social relation towards the other that the other has towards him. As subjects of exchange, their relation is therefore that of equality."<sup>21</sup> However, the ideology of exchange equality conceals an exploitation rooted in the economic structure of production. "Thus if one individual accumulates and the other does not, then none does it at the expense of the other .... If one grows impoverished and the other grows wealthier, then this is of their own free will and does not in any way arise from the economic relation, the economic connection as such, in which they are placed in relation to one another."<sup>22</sup>

In sum, the fetishism of commodities posed a serious problem for Marx. It represented an ideological barrier to recognizing the desirability and attainment of social control of the means of production — a pre-requisite of socialist society. Such fetishism consisted of mistaken attitudes on the part of workers (and presumably capitalists too) toward money, commodities, capital, and the exchange process. It involved ignoring the inequality and exploitation of capitalist society along with the acceptance of that society as a neutral or even benign exchange society. Nevertheless, while it is possible to reconstruct Marx's stand on commodity fetishism and acknowledge his concern with it, and while it is not difficult even today to appreciate the novelty and provocative nature of the doctrine, it invites comparison with Marx's own "young Hegelian" period. For we must remember that commodity fetishism was, for Marx, an illusion similar to religion. His attempt to exorcise the demon of fetishism in *Capital* seems similar to the young Hegelian fashion of "critiquing" illusions. Marx's own earlier admonition concerning "critiques" of religion is germane to his treatment of commodity fetishism in *Capital*: "The demand to abandon illusions about their condition is a demand to abandon a condition which requires illusions. The criticism of religion is thus in embryo a criticism of the

## FETISHISM REVISITED

vale of tears whose halo is religion.”<sup>23</sup> Even without yet raising the question of whether there is any reason for one to take Marx’s version of commodity fetishism as seriously as he did, there is some reason to think he unduly elevated its importance.

### II

At this point, some brief remarks about the concept of “reification” are relevant. It was Marx’s belief that people were misled not only about the exchange of commodities but about the sphere of production too. He thought that social relationships among commodity producers appeared to them as “materialized” relations. Although Marx did not use the term “reification” in the section on fetishism in *Capital*, he seems to have implicitly considered the concept. This is confirmed by consulting a corresponding section from the *Grundrisse*.

Reification is literally the treatment of something as a material thing, and like so many concepts in Marx it is a critical, polemical concept. That is, Marx typically thought that instances of reification were instances of some sort of mistake or misattribution. Something which is not actually, essentially, or solely a material thing comes to be considered as a thing or thing-like. A reified consciousness or reified concepts are just conceivings of something as thing-like. At one time or another Marx tried to show that human beings in capitalist society reify a large number of items: human relationships, science, values, institutions, activities, economics, etc.

Generally speaking, the reification of something for Marx involves missing its human or social characteristics and its amenability to social control, together with an apprehension of its merely objective, indifferent, independent, abstract, possibly alien or extraneous features. Marx considered a reified *x* much as Hegel regarded Kant’s idea of a thing-in-itself, it was the idea of something fully abstracted from human experience which, however, ought to be re-integrated with human experience. Marx’s doctrine of reification is, at least on the economic level, closely related to his doctrine of commodity fetishism as its counterpart. Indeed, Marx says that the reification of labor is part of the cause of the fetishism of commodities. “This Fetishism of commodities has its origin ... in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them.”<sup>24</sup> Our laboring activity in producing commodities is human and social, yet we look upon it in an atomized, abstract, mechanical sense, thus leaving ourselves vulnerable to the fetishistic appearance of commodities.

One expression in *Capital* of the claim that labor is reified is the following: “To them [the producers], their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.”<sup>25</sup> In the

## JOHN P. BURKE

*Grundrisse* Marx was more explicit. After criticizing Smith's idea that the individual pursuit of private interest serves the general interest without knowing or willing it, Marx offers his own version of the "invisible hand". However atomized and individualistic producers may seem to be, the fact is that they are all mutually dependent upon one another. This mutual dependence gives them a "social connection" or "social bond" with one another even if in their production relationships they happen to be indifferent to one another. Their social relatedness only expresses itself in the arena of exchange where the products of their activity meet and interact and where it becomes clear that the products of labor must serve some social or general need.

... the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of *exchange value*, of *money*. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket.<sup>26</sup>

Marx, not wholly unlike Smith, believes that private self-seeking conceals a general social inter-relatedness of which individuals become aware only in exchange and thus only in a temporally removed and qualitatively altered manner. This leads to a reified conception of labor and productive activity generally.

The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual — their mutual inter-connection — here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing.<sup>27</sup>

What Marx ultimately finds objectionable about the reification of labor is what was objectionable about the fetishism of commodities. He thinks that

## FETISHISM REVISITED

there is a form of social inter-relatedness or community which underlies our association as mere exchangers and consumers. Reification thus masks an underlying community of people, a social inter-relatedness of needy, productive, cooperative, and consuming individuals. As long as our vision is dominated by the spectacle of exchange and consumption, we as producers will in fact be dominated by our productions and the market structure of commodity producing society. Commodity producing society will simply be accepted as an unquestioned, natural, matter of fact. We will not suspect that our social being as consumers and exchangers actually rests on a deeper form of social being as producers. The hidden social character of commodities consists in the social character of labor which serves social needs.

Marx even offers what might be called a "transcendental" argument for the priority of the association of producers over the association of exchangers. He asks why people place faith in a thing like money when they do not place faith in each other. He answers:

Obviously only because that thing is an *objectified relation* between persons; because it is objectified exchange value, and exchange value is nothing more than a mutual relation between people's productive activities .... money serves him only as the 'dead pledge of society,' but it serves as such only because of its social (symbolic) property; and it can have a social property only because individuals have alienated their own social relationship from themselves so that it takes the form of a thing.<sup>28</sup>

The underlying, "presupposed" community of producers is defective however.<sup>29</sup> As I interpret Marx, our lack of direct, planned, social regulation and control over production actually does leave us prey to the vicissitudes of our products in their behaviour on the market. Commodity fetishism and labor reification thus seem, on Marx's own account, not mere appearances but realities as well. They are characterized as appearances in order to lend some credence to Marx's belief that there is a more fundamental reality which needs to be rediscovered and reformed: the sphere of production needs to be rediscovered and reformed into socialistic production. Only then will commodity fetishism and reification cease afflicting us as illusions, or realities, or both.

III

Marxist theory has presumed that "commodity fetishism" and "reification" signify "monsters lurking in the background". My purpose in revisiting Marx's doctrines of commodity fetishism and reification has been to critically analyze what Marx apparently found "monstrous" about commodity fetishism and reification. Even as Marx may have understood them, they remain relatively abstruse doctrines.

I have suggested that Marx had recourse to metaphysical sorts of reasoning to fashion such doctrines but that he had a political point in doing so. Whatever vitality could be attributed to these doctrines derived in no small way from Marx's ontology of community — his assumption of the fundamental priority of our social being as producers over our social existence as exchangers and consumers. It is not at all clear that these two doctrines had or can have the political function he intended due to some of the shortcomings in the doctrines I have noted. In particular, such shortcomings serve to point out that the premise of an underlying productive community offering a "truer" picture of our social agency is questionable. As I interpret Marx, re-acquaintance with the social relations of production was supposed to assist us in shaking off mystifications of capitalist society such as commodity fetishism and labor reification. That a clearer understanding of the actual power structure of commodity-producing society should alleviate some misunderstandings about the nature, value, or significance of commodities is not implausible. However, the existence of such misunderstandings or illusions is surely in need of demonstration, as I have noted already.

In any event, what exactly is involved in becoming re-acquainted with the relationships of production? At least in an advanced capitalist society, the scale of specialization, the disconnectedness of disparate operations, the multiplicity of productive functions virtually defy an integrative grasp of the realm of production. Both the technical and the human features of the sphere of production largely elude comprehension by the majority of us. Thus the project of penetrating the sphere of production and of "restoring" a sense of an underlying community of producers appears unfeasible. At best, this analysis relegates Marx's image of such a community to the realm of historical possibility, specifically, to the future.

Moreover, on the hypothesis that significant social consciousness of such a productive community could be achieved within capitalist society, I venture to assert that such awareness would at present harbour no evident promise of satisfying people's needs or alleviating a single social problem of the sort with which critical social theory is concerned. To be blunt, to what particular problem or concrete difficulty would the demystification of commodity fetishism or labor reification represent a remedy? A contemporary defender of

## FETISHISM REVISITED

Marx's original doctrines should identify such current ailments explicitly.

Marx thought that reification and commodity fetishism were serious social problems, but should we? Are there good reasons for contemporary Marxism and critical social theory to retain such doctrines? Or are they parts of Marx's theory which can be wisely and safely rejected? I see no obvious reason why they ought to be retained and thought about along Marx's original lines. The original doctrines, if not entirely lifeless, are too emaciated to contribute to the effort of liberation for which they were evidently designed. This is especially true of the original conception of commodity fetishism.

This does not rule out the possibility that the doctrines could be re-interpreted, revised, or re-conceived to illuminate new phenomena in fruitful and interesting ways. This seems to be the direction taken by some recent studies of consumer society which attempt to show how commodities are increasingly invested with a variety of symbolic and cultural properties to an extent which overwhelms a correct perception of their actual attributes and their quality.<sup>30</sup> Such studies suggest that people may indeed be commodity fetishists but that their fetishism has a different content from what Marx had in mind. For example, Fred Hirsch cites a "new commodity fetishism" which consists in a "bias" toward commodities "in the fundamental sense of excessive creation and absorption of commodities and not merely an undue conceptual preoccupation with them in the original sense of Marx — a masking of social relationships under capitalism by their mediation through commodity exchange."<sup>31</sup>

Hirsch maintains that "an excessive proportion of individual activity is channeled through the market so that the commercialized sector of our lives is unduly large."<sup>32</sup> We increasingly treat all goods and services, including the non-material ones, as commercialized instruments of satisfaction, "social contact, relaxation and play become 'bought' commodities."<sup>33</sup> He also points out that one result of rendering the range of goods and services as commodities is growing dissatisfaction with what we acquire.<sup>34</sup>

Hirsch appropriates a traditional Marxist label but does so in order to identify and diagnose "modern commodity fetishism". His is the sort of diagnosis which plausibly offers at least preliminary tools for solving certain felt social problems, whereas Marx's original doctrine does not. Confronted with such promising empirical work, it is insufficient to merely voice the caution that our thinking about commodity fetishism and reification should not become reified itself.

Finally, Marx thought commodity fetishism was similar to religion in that it was nourished by factors in our social reality, gave a false picture of that reality, but could only vanish when we learned to embrace reality and change those features which necessitate such myths and illusions.

## JOHN P. BURKE

The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan. This, however, demands for society a certain material ground-work or set of conditions of existence which in their turn are the spontaneous product of a long and painful process of development.<sup>35</sup>

I would only add to Marx's claim that it seems best to remain agnostic concerning what role, if any, the original doctrines of commodity fetishism and reification will have in that "long and painful process of development" toward socialism.<sup>36</sup>

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### Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Capital*, I, New York: 1969, "Preface to the First German Edition," p. 8.
2. *Capital*, I, "Afterword to the Second German Edition," p. 20.
3. Stanley Moore, "The Metaphysical Argument in Marx's Labour Theory of Value," *Cahiers de L'Institut de Science Economique Appliquee*, Supplement No. 140 (Aout 1963) Serie S, 7, p.92.
4. Marshall Sahlins has argued that Marx uncritically assumed the use-value of commodities was self-evident and unproblematical. See *Culture and Practical Reason*, Chicago: 1976, chapter 3.
5. *Capital*, I, p.72.
6. Stephen Kline and William Leiss raise some fruitful questions for the "mystery thesis" in "Advertising, Needs, and 'Commodity Fetishism'" in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol.2, No. 1 (Winter, 1978), pp. 5-30, especially pp.9-13.
7. *Capital*, I, p.72.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. For purposes of the present discussion, I have simplified Marx's concept of the social character of labor. Some of the complexity of his concept may be appreciated by consulting his 1844 manuscript "Free Human Production".

## FETISHISM REVISITED

11. There is, of course, a decisive commodity exchange in the realm of production itself — that of labor-power for wages. Since labor-power in capitalist society is for Marx an alienated commodity, laboring activity may be "reified" and commodity fetishism could attach to labor power as well as other commodities. Professor Arthur DiQuattro brought my attention to this point.
12. *Capital*, I, p. 75.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, New York: 1970, p. 34.
15. *Capital*, I, p. 74.
16. *Capital*, I, "Cooperation," pp. 322-35.
17. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Eliot, New York: 1957, p.17.
18. He explicitly compares commodity-producing society with four other productive "societies": a Crusoe situation of an individual producer, a patriarchal peasant family, a feudal society, and a productive order suggestive of socialism. In none of these does Marx believe fetishism will be found. *Capital*, I, pp. 76-79.
19. *Capital*, III, p. 827: "Capital thus becomes a very mystic being since all of labour's social productive forces appear to be due to capital, rather than labour as such, and seem to issue from the womb of capital itself."
20. *Capital*, III, p. 392.
21. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, translated by Martin Nicolaus, London: 1973, p. 241.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
23. "Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction", in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. by Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, New York: 1967, p. 250. In fairness to Marx, it should be stressed that both his early and later "critiques" contain implicit calls for revolutionizing those conditions which foster illusions.
24. *Capital*, I, p. 72.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 75 It is possible to read this as nothing more than the transposition-distortion thesis of the fetishism doctrine rather than a claim that labor appears reified. Cf. p. 73: "To the latter [the producers] the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things." This passage involves an ambiguity suggestive of a two-tiered appearance-reality problem.
26. *Grundrisse*, p. 157.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Grundrisse*, p. 160.

## JOHN P. BURKE

29. Cf. Hegel's image of a community of reciprocal producers in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford: 1977, pp. 212-214.
30. See Kline and Leiss, *op. cit.*; William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*, Toronto: 1976; Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*, New York: 1976; Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1976.
31. Hirsch, p. 84. Marx's rejoinder presumably would point out that such "inflation" in the production and consumption of commodities is precisely what one should expect to find given the necessarily expansionist character of capitalist commodity production.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Hirsch, p. 103.
34. Cf. Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*.
35. *Capital*, I, p.80.
36. An earlier, shorter version of this paper was presented in a special panel, "Marx and Marxism Reconsidered," at the Pacific Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association, at San Francisco, California, March 23, 1978. I thank Dr. Stanley Moore for his perceptive commentary and Professors Arthur Kroker and Ronald Perrin for many helpful suggestions. I am also indebted to members of the Social Theory Colloquium, University of Washington, for a valuable discussion of the present version of this paper.