

Commodity Fetishism as a Form of Life

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The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth -- i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. (Second Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx, 1970, P. 121)

SECTION ONE INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Wittgenstein had a mixed attitude toward the practice of Marxism. According to someone who knew Wittgenstein well in the 1930s, "he was opposed to [Marxism] in theory, but supported it in practice;" and he is reported to have said: "I am a communist, *at heart*" (Monk, 1990, p. 343). For some time Wittgenstein explored the possibility of relocating to the Soviet Union to live and at one point the University of Moscow offered him a teaching position in philosophy (Monk, p. 351).

The impact of the theory of Marxism on Wittgenstein's philosophy is also mixed. According to Wittgenstein, in his posthumously published Philosophical Investigations, (Wittgenstein, 1958) Piero Sraffa was the most important influence on his repudiation of the ideas of his earlier Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: "I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book

. . . I am indebted to [the criticism that] M. P. Sraffa, for many years unceasingly practised on my thoughts. I am indebted to *this* stimulus for the most consequential ideas of [the Investigations]" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. vi; emphasis in original). From his letters to Gramsci and from testimony by Joan Robinson and others, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Sraffa was in turn strongly influenced by Marx.

These reflections inspire the following preliminary exploration into the similarities and differences between Wittgenstein and Marx. I argue that there is a similarity between Marx's criticism of political economy and Wittgenstein's criticism of philosophy, focusing on Marx's discussion of value and Wittgenstein's discussion of language. Specifically, Marx's discussion of the fetishizing of commodities is in some ways analogous to Wittgenstein's discussion of the subliming of language. Marx's political economists and Wittgenstein's philosophers both lacked an adequate materialist standard as a result reified language and value. I believe that understanding this analogy helps shed light on the thinking of both figures.

SECTION TWO COMMODITY FETISHISM

There is no consensus on the meaning of the Marx's notion of fetishism of commodities. In a well known passage Marx says that in

the misty realm of religion . . . the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

At a general level, commodity fetishism as Foley says, is a "curious and pervasive distortion" which reflects the "paradoxical consciousness" that is "imposed on the human beings who live through" commodity production (Foley, 1986, p. 29). Hussain, in the New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics, says commodity fetishism is the "term used by Marx to characterize the perception of social

relations under the sway of commodity exchange" (Hussain, 1987, p. 495). More bluntly, Elster says "The capitalist economy secretes illusions about itself" (Elster, 1986, p. 56).

But the particular character of the "illusion" or "distortion" has not been as well understood. For Foley, the specific error resulting from commodity fetishism is that "Commodity relations tend to make people view others instrumentally rather than intersubjectively and to induce people to enter into personal and emotional relations with things" (Foley, 1986, p. 29). Hussain sees the specific error in the relationship between capitalists and labourers in which the true nature of surplus is concealed (Hussain, 1987, p. 496).

But Cleaver reminds us that the discussion of commodity fetishism in Capital follows from Marx's discussion of the commodity-form and claims that this amounts to "denouncing the analysis he has just undertaken" (Cleaver, 1979, p. 65) and prescribing "putting commodities and all their determinations into their place within the class relations" (Cleaver, 1979, p. 66). Elster recognizes that commodity fetishism is connected with the analysis of the value of commodities, but does not connect this with Marx's own analysis:

Commodity fetishism is the belief that goods possess value just as they possess weight, as an inherent property. To the unmythified mind, it is clear that a commodity has exchange value only because it stands in certain relations to human labour and human needs (Elster, 1986, p. 57)

This claim that commodity fetishism involves the attribution of natural properties to value resembles but differs from Marx's assertion that: "the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (Marx, 1976, p. 164-65). Elster continues that the argument "is somewhat unconvincing, because it is hard to believe that anyone ever committed this particular fallacy" (Elster, 1986, p. 57)

In Capital, the discussion of fetishism arises because Marx asserts that his analysis of exchange value creates something mysterious: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx, 1976, p. 163). Marx's use of "its analysis" refers to the analysis concluded in the immediately preceding section. This suggests that Cleaver is correct vis-a-vis Elster's claim that "it is hard to believe that anyone ever committed this particular fallacy," that the discussion of fetishism does refer to Marx's own analysis and that of political economy. The mysterious character of commodities has appeared in the analysis of the commodity, which precedes the section on fetishism itself. "Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself" (Marx, 1976). Marx's preceding discussion of the value-form or exchange value argues that use-values "have the form of commodities, in so far as they possess a double-form i.e., natural form and value form" (Marx, 1976, p. 138). The mystery has nothing to do with the natural form and therefore must spring from the value form. In the section on the value form Marx wrote:

commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical human labour, that their objective character as values is therefore purely social. From this it follows self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity (Marx, 1976, pp. 138-39).

Marx analyzes this "social relation between commodity and commodity" from the simple form of value to the money form of value, in each case characterizing the relationships as equality of various quantities of various commodities in the roles of the relative and equivalent forms of value.

The source of the mystery, then, is that value takes on the appearance of abstract human labor expressed in the equality of the various commodities: a social relation which appears as a relation between things. The human products which "appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into

relations both with each other and with the human race" are exchange values understood as the expression of abstract human labor, viz. the labor theory of value.

This conclusion raises a question concerning the sense in which this interpretation of commodity fetishism negates or "denounces" the labor theory of value. The key issue here is whether it is correct to speak of the labor theory of value as a "distortion" or "fallacy". In this regard, it is useful to consider the religious metaphor cited above at which Marx finally arrives to describe commodity fetishism

The religious metaphor in this context connotes some type of illusion, suggesting that there is something unreal, or at least of questionable objectivity in exchange-values. Even at the beginning of his chapter on commodities Marx questions the possibility that exchange value has an objective structure: "exchange value appears to be something accidental and purely relative" (Marx, 1976 p. 126). Marx also calls our attention to the mysterious nature of exchange-value when he refers to values as "congealed quantities of homogeneous human labor" (Marx, 1976, p. 128; "Gallerte unterscheidloser menschliche Arbeit," Marx, 1987, p. 52) which have "phantomlike objectivity" (Marx, 1976, p. 128; "gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit" Marx, 1987, p. 52). The strangeness of commodities, that is, lies in the system of exchange values, which appear as objective intermediaries between individuals and the products of their social labor. The "semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labour" (Marx, 1976, p. 167) gives the process of production "mastery of man instead of the opposite" (Marx, 1976, p. 175).

Nevertheless, exchange-values do "appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race." Marx points out that the idea that there can be social relations between things is "fantastic"; nevertheless he also says that this is "what they are" (Marx, 1976, p. 166). The contradiction, however, lies in the nature of commodity

production. The exchange-value of a commodity does reflect the labor time embodied in its production even though, Marx argues, this is absurd:

If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver . . . the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form (Marx, 1976, p. 169).

While Elster is correct that values do not appear as physical characteristics, they nevertheless have objectivity both for individuals in their everyday lives and in the labor theory of value. This implies that commodity fetishism is not simply a fallacy, and that Marx's analysis does not hold the key to avoiding fetishism of commodities, but rather of recognizing it. While Elster refers to the "unmystified mind", the mystery is a property of reality, not a particular mind. It is not the case that those of us who understand the notion of commodity fetishism can therefore simply reject exchange-values, at least not if we wish to understand or participate in a commodity infested society.

Marx's use of the religious metaphor to describe commodity fetishism alludes to his The German Ideology (Marx, 1970). There he mocked the Young Hegelians for believing that simply recognizing that people allow their own ideas to rule over them is sufficient to overcome those ideas:

The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude toward them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and - existing reality will collapse (Marx, 1970, p. 37).

The reason that commodity fetishism exists, i.e., the reason that social labor is objectified, according to Marx, is that people do it: "by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it (Marx, 1976, p. 167). Not for any theoretical reason, but "experience shows" that this equation is "constantly being made" (Marx, 1976, p. 135).

Therefore to overcome commodity fetishism it is necessary to change the way people live: "The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in transparent and rational form" (Marx, 1976, p. 173).

SECTION THREE: SUBLIMING THE LANGUAGEⁱ

According to the early Wittgenstein, ordinary language obscures and conceals the otherwise simple relationship between thought, language and the world:

Everyday language is part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it . . . It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is . . . Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes (Wittgenstein, 1961, pp. 35-37).

The problem lies in the inadequate character of everyday speech:

In everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification -- and so belongs to different symbols -- or that two words have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way . . . In this way the most fundamental confusions are easily produced (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 29).

The argument of the Tractatus is intended to overcome this problem. The method Wittgenstein suggests is to create a clear and unambiguous language. In order to avoid the errors that result from the deficiency of language:

we must make use of a sign-language that excludes them by not using the same sign for different symbols and by not using in a superficially similar way signs that have different modes of signification: that is to say, a sign-language that is governed by logical grammar -- by logical syntax (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 29).

Such a language would allow us to rest at everyday language in unambiguous terms so that its meaning might be determined. This superior language becomes the invariable standard in terms of which the truth and falsity of propositions can be judged.

Under Sraffa's influence, Wittgenstein rejected this approach. The later Wittgenstein recognized the limitations of the theory of language that he proposed in his earlier work. The theory of the Tractatus:

does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises "Is this an appropriate description or not?" The answer is: "Yes it is appropriate, but only for the narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 3)

The early theory presents a "particular picture of the essence of human language" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 2), not as a description of language as a whole. This picture of language involved asserting facts, but Wittgenstein argues in the Investigations that there are many different uses for language in addition to asserting facts. In that work he discusses a variety of different models of language, language-games, but only as "objects of comparison", not "as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 51). Wittgenstein's later view was that meanings depend on the context in which propositions occur and are therefore reflected in activities or "forms of life".

The key to Wittgenstein's shift is in his rejection of his previous notion that ordinary language conceals its meaning:

If it is asked: "How do sentences manage to represent?" -- the answer might be: "Don't you know? You certainly see it, when you use them" For nothing is concealed.

How do sentences do it? -- Don't you know? For nothing is hidden. (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 228).

It is therefore a mistake to try to look beyond ordinary language for anything that is "sublime":

One person might say "A proposition is the most ordinary thing in the world" and another: "A proposition -- that's something very queer!" ---- And the latter is unable simply to look and see how propositions really work. The forms that we use in expressing ourselves about propositions and thought stand in the way . . .

'A proposition is a queer thing!' Here we have the subliming of our whole account of logic. The tendency to assume a pure intermediary between the propositional sign and the facts. Or even to try to purify, to sublime, the signs themselves. -- For our forms of expression prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing out of the ordinary is involved, by sending us in pursuit of chimeras (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 44).

In this later view, there is no superior language which expresses the true essence of language and the attempt to find an underlying essence keeps us from seeing:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something -- because it is always before one's eyes.) The foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact at some time struck him -- And this means: we fail to be struck by what,

once seen, is most striking and most powerful (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 50).

SECTION FOUR AN ANALOGY

In this section I suggest an analogy between the ideas outlined in the two previous sections, between value in Marx and language in Wittgenstein. In his discussion of commodity fetishism Marx suggests such an analogy himself: "the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language" (Marx, 1976, p. 167). Although entirely social, both are composed of elemental units, propositions and commodities, which can be considered individually. In both cases an element is ordinary, simple, trivial, in its everyday use, but queer and mysterious when theorized by experts, i.e., political economists and philosophers. Just as Wittgenstein views a language as reflecting an activity or "form of life," exchange-value reflects commodity production.

There is also an analogy between Marx's account of commodity fetishism and Wittgenstein's account of the "subliming of language". Each case involves what Wittgenstein refers to as the "tendency to assume a pure intermediary." For Wittgenstein this meant constructing an ideal language with a rational structure with which the messy appearances of everyday language might be understood. For Marx the pure intermediary is the system of exchange values expressed as abstract human labor which provides a rational structure with which the messy appearances of everyday prices might be understood. In both cases, the granting of universality by political economists and philosophers to the system of exchange-values and language provides the "semblance of objectivity" which allows them to interact with humans as independent beings.

In both cases, the implied criticism of political economists and philosophers is not so much that the approaches they criticized were internally inconsistent or false in themselves, but that they were limited and therefore mistaken in their pretensions to universality. Crucial to Marx's critique of political economy is

the argument that political economy viewed social and economic relations under capital as eternal and unchanging, while according to Marx they are historically specific and temporary. On the other hand, in his Investigations, Wittgenstein argues that the theory of language expressed in the Tractatus, which was originally presented as a universal theory of language, actually describes only a particular use of language, the assertion of facts, whereas in fact there are many other uses for language.

Marx and Wittgenstein are able to recognize the pretensions to universality for what they are because they see value and language as reflected historically specific "forms of life". They employ similar methods to illustrate this point. Wittgenstein uses the method of what he calls "language games":

These are ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language . . . When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 17).

Although this bears some resemblance to the process of model building that modern economists frequently employ, Wittgenstein emphasizes an important difference. These "clear and simple language-games" are not

preparatory studies for a future regularization of language -- as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance. The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language . . . not as preconceived idea[s] to which reality *must* correspond (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 50-51).

A crucial aspect of Wittgenstein's conception of language-games is that they are connected with "forms of life": "Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 11). A particular use of language, that is to say, reflects a manner of living: "And to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 8).

From this derives Wittgenstein's well known assertion that meaning depends on use: "For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 20). Since a language reflects a form of life, the meaning of words and propositions reflects their functions within the ordinary activities with which they are associated.

I would suggest that Marx employs a similar method, not with language, but with what might be called "production-games". Consider, for example, his analysis of simple commodity production. It is a primitive form in that it abstracts from many of the complications of capitalist economies; it is clearly not intended to serve as a precise model of reality; nevertheless, it serves to shed light on certain aspects of capitalist economies. In order to clarify the meaning of commodity fetishism, Marx contrasts the simple commodity production-game with the Robinson Crusoe production-game, the medieval Europe production-game, the peasant family production-game, and the freely associated individual production-game. None of these is presented as a precise model of how a particular economy functions, but each is intended to shed some light on the issue at hand.

In both cases this method is crucial to the nature of the critiques presented because it is through this method that the partial character of the objects of the respective critiques are revealed. Wittgenstein demonstrated the limited character of the argument of the Tractatus by expressing it as a language-game and comparing that language-game with others. Similarly, Marx showed the limited character of capitalist relations by contrasting them with alternative systems of production.

According to Wittgenstein, the practice of philosophy produces misunderstandings because it attempts to give a universal account of the meaning of words and propositions outside of their ordinary employment: "philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 19). An important aspect of Wittgenstein's criticism of the manner in which philosophy has been carried out is that it lacks a certain materialism because it abstracts

language into an ideal realm and ignores the everyday practices in particular uses of language occur.

In the German Ideology, Marx makes a similar point:

The philosophers would only have to dissolve their language into the ordinary language from which it is abstracted, to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realize that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only manifestations of actual life (Marx, 1970, p. 118).

For both Wittgenstein and Marx, then, the connection between language and concrete forms of life implies a corresponding linkage between theory and practice.

For both Marx and Wittgenstein the difficulty in recognizing the illusory character of fetishizing and subliming lies in the ubiquity of everyday life.

Wittgenstein says:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something -- because it is always before one's eyes.) (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 50).

Similarly, Marx argued with respect to commodity fetishism that "If . . . we make the mistake of treating it as the eternal natural form of social production, we necessarily overlook the specificity of the value-form and consequently of the commodity form together with its further developments, the money form, the capital form etc." (Marx, 1976, p. 174). Here the peculiar character of capitalist relations, which is the foundation for political economy, escape notice because they are assumed to be natural and eternal.

As a result, both Wittgenstein and Marx engaged in what might be called the natural history of human beings. . . . [Work in progress - conclusion at conference]

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ⁱ For a more detailed discussion of the issues in this section, see Andrews (1996).