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Is Karl Marx’s Concept of Commodity Fetishism Still Relevant Today?

In the first chapter of Capital (1867), Marx’s theory of the commodity of fetishism is more unexpected than it sounds. While workers are exploited by capitalism, it conceals that not only from those who benefit, but also from the workers themselves. As a commodity is produced and is sent out to the market, the human labour and social relations that produced it disappear from sight. The product that is left holds value like some natural, intrinsic feature. In Marx’s words, the social character of labour is reflected as “an object character stamped upon the product of that labour.” We forget the part where we made the thing. We act as if it holds dominion over us. Hence the term “fetish,” borrowed from religious anthropology, referring to objects people worship as if they have autonomous, supernatural power.

The clear obstacle to Marx's significance is the passage of time. He wrote about industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century: mills, textile machines, the cost of linen. One can reasonably question if a notion centered on the created item is still relevant in an economy primarily structured around services, data, and individual identity. The answer is affirmative, but only if we genuinely consider how commodity fetishism has evolved instead of merely diminishing. Alison Hearn's perspective on self-branding addresses this more effectively than any straightforward justification of Marx would.

The clear challenge to Marx’s relevance is historical distance. He wrote about mills, textile machines and the cost of linen to describe industrial capitalism in the 19th century. Although Marx focused on physical commodities, his idea is still relevant in today’s economy, which is increasingly based on services, data, and identity. When only considering how commodity fetishism has evolved instead of diminishing. Which Hearn’s perspective on self branding is more effective than any justification of Marx.

Hearn argues in his 2008 article that creating and managing your identity has become a form of labour in modern capitalism. Individuals are encouraged to construct a “branded self” through reality television and social media building a polished market oriented identity to attract and extract value. This phenomenon is literal rather than metaphorical. Hearn records how personal branding experts like Tom Peters communicate to employees straightforwardly: "From this moment on, you are a brand." The individual is reshaped into a commodity. Relationships, personality, and even friendships are regarded as brand assets to be managed and utilized. The self is no longer the entity that conducts the selling. It is that which is being offered for sale.

The link to Marx is not incidental. Commodity fetishism functions in that it hides the social relations and labour behind an object’s apparent value. Self-branding does something structurally similar, except the object is the person. On Facebook or MySpace, Hearn suggests, users are turned into “commodity-signs to be collected and consumed in the social marketplace,” and human relationships reduce themselves to follower counts, endorsements and other forms of accrued social capital. The fetish has migrated inward. We do not only worship objects we have constructed, but rather versions of ourselves constructed for the market, while forgetting the labour that went into the construction.

The hiding of that work is important. Marx's fetishism relies on obscuring production, allowing the commodity to present itself without any visible history. Hearn observes the same reasoning in the way self-branding is marketed to individuals. The exhausting, unyielding effort of shaping a public persona is reframed as personal growth, even freedom. Branding experts present the entire process as "not focused on attaining status, riches, or celebrity" but on "building a life of significance." The deeper the self immerses in market logic, the more the surrounding language emphasizes authenticity and individual freedom.

A valid point is that individuals are now more aware of this than Hearn's 2008 account suggests. Users of social media openly ridicule the performance, make jokes about the algorithm, and refer to their own posts as content. This type of self-awareness may appear to be something that Marx's framework was never designed to address. However, understanding a dynamic is not equivalent to being external to it. Marx never claimed that workers overlooked their wages or living conditions. His argument was structural: that the dynamics of capitalist production shape social life in ways that remain constant, irrespective of individual opinions. The same is true now. Acknowledging that your online presence acts as a personal brand does not prevent it from serving that purpose. The irony, if anything, is woven back into the performance, as the knowing wink evolves into its own type of content.

An important observation is that people are currently more aware of this than what Hearn's 2008 narrative indicates. Social media users publicly mock the performance, joke about the algorithm, and label their own posts as content. This form of self-awareness might seem like an issue that Marx's framework was never intended to resolve. Marx never argued that workers ignored their salaries or living situations. His argument was structural: that the dynamics of capitalist production influence social life in ways that hold steady, regardless of personal views. The current situation reflects the same reality. Recognizing that your online presence functions as a personal brand does not hinder it from fulfilling that role. The irony, if anything, intertwines itself within the performance, as the aware nod transforms into its own form of substance.

Commodity fetishism is not a product of Victorian economic thought. It elucidates how capitalism persistently seeks to represent its actions as aspects of nature. Hearn's research shows that this process has moved into new areas, shifting from manufactured goods to created identities. She asserts that the branded identity shows that flexible corporate capital has "incorporated every aspect of human life, including the concept of a private self." Marx pinpointed the process. The region in which it operates has only expanded since that time.