4 | Critical Commodity Theory

In Marx, the word *critical* and its cognates refer to the desired transparency of a theory. The term echoes Kant in that to be critical a theory must justify its own methodology, that is, in contemporary terms one is aware of the security and scope of the deep assumptions of the theory one is using, sometimes called the "metatheory," and one takes explicit cognizance of the initial and boundary conditions for employing the theory.[1]

Marx's use of *critical* includes the Kantian meaning but adds to it an "ideological" dimension, namely, that one ought to be aware of the social-material and historical conditions within which the theory has emerged, of the limits of its claims to universality or historical transcendence, and of the social-material interests that the theory may variously highlight or obscure, advance or retard. At this point, we should adopt such a critical attitude to the differences between old and modern commodity form.

"Quasi Service" as Analytical Element

The microtheory of modern commodity form is built up from the analytical element "quasi service," that is, a service incomplete in itself, which must be complemented with other quasi services. It is "the primitive element of the system" and plays an appreciable role throughout the findings of this study. As a theoretical element it is intended to supersede both the neoclassical, unmodified "service" and Marx's similarly unqualified "use-value," and to that extent it has the effect of revising and updating the logic of both traditions. In my view, an unqualified service (or use-value) is inadequate in principle to the description and analysis of modern commodity form. In Marx, for example, commodities often seem to be depicted as things that provide use-values, and it is the things that come to be exchanged, with the use-values following along as if on a leash.[2]

But this locution—or, better, this analytical construction—does not allow for the possibility that the different services of a commodity can be transferred over time rather than being alienated all at once or that they may require complements. As I'll explain in the following section, this didn't make much difference in Marx's lifetime because of the very primitive state of capitalist production and exchange. Altering our conceptual apparatus to quasi services, including especially "potential services," that is, quasi services as modified by time, provides a much more supple, realistic, and socially warranted instrument for analyzing modern commodity practices. The change in terminology also serves to underline the fact that in modern practice—and modern usage—it is the services per se that are subject to exchange and distribution and we have already signaled this meaning in preferring the term *commodity form* to *commodity*.

The unqualified use-value also points up the oft-cited weakness of the Marxist theory of "final" or consumer demand (e.g., Arrow and Hahn 1971: 2). Admittedly, one must be cautious in speaking of Marx's "theory of demand" for consumer goods since there is no systematic, unified treatment of the subject in *Capital*. But its elements and the way he puts them together are clear enough.

There are two closely related inadequacies. As was suggested by our earlier citation of those "cruel South Americans," in Marx's view final consumption is left to the laborer's own "instincts" and accordingly occurs outside the economy per se or, as he would put it, outside the continuous circulation and recirculation of capital.[3]

I think that the best way to understand the second point is to observe that Marx treats all of the working class's consumption *as if* it were a single, undifferentiated service. Basically, his notion is that there is a mass of commodities falling to the lot of the workers, the very limited size and variety of which "springs from" the actions of the economy, but that mass is normally only just large enough to reproduce the working class more or less as it is, that is, as a proletariat. How that limited mass of commodities is consumed, what sort of services it is comprised of, and its further effect on the economy, especially on the productive characteristics of the work force, are not really subject to analysis in Marx's scheme of things. All in all, the use-value of workers' consumption commodities is to make sure that more or less the same working population that worked yesterday will return regularly to work tomorrow and the next day. The following elaboration will make his view of consumer demand clearer and in passing will illustrate the limited contemporary value of the unqualified concept of use-value.

In passages drawn from the second and third volumes of *Capital,* an

economy can be modeled as consisting of three distinct Departments (Marx's term) in equilibrium. Department I produces means of production, Department II produces consumption goods for workers, and Department III produces means of consumption for capitalists.[4] In the Marxist scheme, the net of the output—roughly, his surplus value—goes to the capitalists either to invest for current maintenance and future growth (Department I) or to devote to their own private, final consumption. (Department III). In a nongrowth model, Department II (workers' consumption) is treated strictly as a recurring cost and no part of the surplus is devoted to it. The workers' share is determined by the level of income necessary to maintain and reproduce the working class at the level determined by what Marx calls the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation.[5]

Thus, from the wording of the law it is evident that Marx had in mind that the mass and quality of consumer goods going to the workers would normally be pressed down toward the minimum necessary to sustain the working class at a quite primitive physical and social level.[6]

He does allow, however, that the operations of the General Law are also modified by custom and the political power and influence of the working class and its social allies. In fact, the very long chapters of volume 1 of *Capital,* "The Working Day" (about 70 pages in the standard English-language translation) and the even longer chapter 15 on "Machinery and Modern Industry" (about 120 pages) are mostly devoted to the conflict over the length (and conditions) of the working day in England from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries with special attention paid to the political/legislative struggles to enact protections for the workers, that is, the various factory acts. Thus, while workers' consumption may from time to time rise a bit it is continually being dragged back down by the operation of the General Law.

As one can see, it is not unfair to say of Marx's theory of demand, as it applies to the workers, that the entire mass of consumer goods going to them can be treated as providing a single, generic service, namely, to maintain a working class of relatively static social-productive characteristics. The different kinds and qualities of consumer goods are of no great concern to the General Law, and the manner of their consumption lies outside the circuit of capital, that is, outside of the economy. The General Law is the central point of the conclusion of volume 1 of *Capital,* and if it is true one doesn't really need a more differentiated concept of use-values or services. The unqualified variant is more than sufficient to describe what he wants to describe, that is, the condition of a laboring population

being maintained at a relatively primitive economic and social level, hence with relatively static productive qualities.

Of course, to maintain this "theory of demand" today, when substantial numbers and kinds of commodities are consumed by a working population, the effect of which, partially a matter of deliberate capitalist policy, alters its productive characteristics, is simply to elide the differences between a modern and a primitive capitalist economy. If we are to go beyond this primitive theory of demand and in particular relate workers' consumption and changes in worker productivity, then the shift to an analytic of quasi services will be indispensable.[7]

The shift to the element "quasi service" also enables us to merge, as they ought to be, microeconomics and marketing and thus avoid the paradoxical "deep" assumption of the mainstream theory that there aren't any fundamental differences between the Victorian and modern sales efforts. Then, too, the unqualified "service" is itself too closely linked to the abstract "utility" of the older, classical tradition in political economy, which, following Smith and Ricardo, treats markets as more or less "natural," or at least unchanging, phenomena.

The concept of quasi service also allows a more adequate account than much current thinking about "the mass market," "advertising," "consumerism," and such like. In the latter, one employs a paradigm of quite impressionable consumers succumbing to a mind-bending ruling class ideology or purely symbolic commands, perhaps even acting on their subliminal hopes, fears, and fantasies. Undoubtedly, some advertising is successful precisely because of this, but the analysis depicts the social relations of consumption as only operating within almost wholly symbolic modes. It does not further articulate the ensembles of actual social-material relations through which consumption is directly constrained under wider, more powerful productive and distributing relationships and the implications of this regarding the influence of capitalism on the construction of general social relations per se.

As we saw in analyzing sale/purchase-in-time, the element quasi service brings out the very existence and force of these wider productive relations, enabling us directly to develop a unified theory of capitalist production, distribution, and consumption without add-ons and without recourse to one-sided, essentially Feuerbachian schemes of abstract "commodification," "the mass media," the crude, ahistoric materialism of assuming a human propensity to herd psychology, and such.[8]

Relatedly, the unqualified service or use-value too often comes to be depicted in economics writing as either natural or generic in character. Is

it simply "natural" for a hammer to serve to drive nails or for (leavened) bread to assuage hunger or are these two services not the product of a lengthy coordinate social evolution in the four dimensions of their commodity form? By treating services as generic one erases the historicity built into commodity form. The element, quasi service helps to keep that historical dimension in the foreground.

Neither does the unqualified service sufficiently bring out a main, emergent feature of modern commodity form, namely, that goods and services, (i.e., service commodities such as laundering or hairdressing) don't represent two quite separate species of commodity but, more typically, that modern commodities per se are comprised of both goods and services mingled in ever more complex ways in their reflex dimensions. Here the unqualified service or use-value again creates an unnecessary analytical and descriptive hurdle when we trace the development of commodity form from Victorian to contemporary times.[9]

Finally, as will be shown in chapters 7 and 8, the unqualified service thoroughly distorts value theory, raising theoretical paradoxes that are as unnecessary as they are unresolvable, burdening economics with the unfortunate doctrine of price determinacy or what I have called "price realism."

A Historical-Materialist Account

The concept of quasi services also helps us to better understand the primitiveness of the capitalist context that faced Jevons, Marx, and their contemporaries and unfortunately shaped the logic of their analyses. What I want to show is that these writers mistakenly thought that they lived within a capitalism that was already well enough developed that they could experience and thus analyze its mature, stable features. In fact, the capitalism of their time was in a distinctly transitory stage, a stage that was passing away almost at the point in time when these authors legislated its features into their basic microeconomics.

Marx may serve as a prime example here. He opens the first volume of *Capital* with the observation, "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities,' its unit being a single commodity."[10]

But as we've already seen, there were relatively few true commodities, in the Marxist sense, in that Victorian economy, that is, commodities embedded within production/exchange relations characterized by the General or Money form of value. This was especially true outside Great

Britain itself. But even there only corn (wheat), coffee, sugar, tea, and a handful of other semiprocessed agricultural goods along with manufacturing coal, wrought and cast iron, gold, silver, and a few other minerals had achieved commodity form, as had cotton, woolen, linen, and perhaps silk thread and cloth, leather and blacking, and a small handful of other manufactured items. Such transportation services as were afforded by stage lines, railroads, canal and river barges, and ocean steamers had also reached commodity form. As one reads *Capital* or any other historical account of the middle years of the Victorian era, it soon becomes apparent that few other goods or services appear in those accounts as illustrations or examples of commodities. Most foodstuffs, for example, such as fresh and cured meat, milk and cheese, beer, fruit and vegetables, were produced and sold only locally, hence with the expected nonuniformity in product, manner of production and distribution, and manner of final consumption we would associate with the Extended form of value. Coal for home heating was only beginning to assume commodity form. Cloth came as a commodity but not garments, nor household tools or furniture, nor drugs and medicines such as they were, nor candles and tapers, nor seed and fertilizer.[11]

Marx's assertion about a "huge accumulation" of commodities represents prescient insight, not a literal description of the commercial and industrial world of his time. Most goods and services that were made and offered for sale, especially for the final consumer, had not yet been sufficiently amplified in the four dimensions of commodity form to qualify as such. Their physical/social characteristics varied too much from region to region; they were produced under significantly different productive conditions; their distribution, including their prices, was only local or otherwise erratic; and/or the consumption of their services had not yet converged into familiar, widespread, crystallized social practices. In this sense, Marx and Jevons lived and wrote during the very infancy—childhood is probably more accurate—of modern commodity production and thus gave an account of commodity production in its childhood. This serves even today to mislead readers as to the stage of development reached by commodity form in the England of 1850–80.

Recall that economists of the time were experiencing and writing about a capitalism that had only recently shifted from handicraft production to the factory system or, in analytical terms, from the Expanded to the General form of value. In the former, we would expect that, say, batches of iron produced under the handicraft system would vary widely in their technical and commercial characteristics. As early railroaders or bridge builders would discover to their dismay, different batches of iron

differed so much in their technical qualities that rails would crack, boilers would burst, or the bridge would collapse. Unless one had previous experience with the producer, the iron one purchased would have essentially unpredictable services or, more or less the same thing, one would discover its real usable qualities only after the fact. Socially speaking, utility or use-value at this stage of capitalism and of exchange is highly specific, as fits the Extended form of value, not the generic, as is required for the later, more developed General or Money forms of value.

Factory production introduced a greater uniformity in commodities but in a period in which both distribution channels and metallurgy itself were undeveloped. The situation was not like that of the present, in which the producer/seller enters into enduring relationships with the metal's user and as a result can more or less customize the technical qualities of iron and steel to the user's needs. In the still emerging Victorian factory system, however, the combination of an elementary distribution system based on "the market" and an underdeveloped metals technology meant that the producer could provide only an iron whose qualities lay within a range or band of technological reliability. That represented an advance over handicraft iron since that range or band of technological qualities made the iron more or less equally useful and reliable to the cutler, the boilermaker, the bridge builder, the rail layer, the naval architect, and so forth. Not ideal for any of those uses, it nevertheless was predictably serviceable for all of them.

Analytically and socially, however, this means that the services of that iron now had a generic rather than specific character, and it is this that is reflected in both Marx's treatment in *Capital* and in the writings of Stanley Jevons. In that sense it was apt to the real historical situation to say that the commodity has use-value or utility, the singular term referring to the genus or band of the specific services adaptable by the different end users.

Interestingly, in its youth the U.S. auto industry exhibited an analogous history. First, a multiplicity of very diverse vehicles were made in small workshops, often by bicycle and carriage makers trying to extend their techniques. Thus, they produced very diverse products with very diverse intended uses and reliability. Then came the Ford Models T and A, designed with simple features and a simple but very reliable technology for use by the farmer but adaptable for the same reason by hosts of others.[12]

Then, as we saw, came the true modern commodity auto in which the dimensions of its commodity form are much further developed. Hilferding's account of the adulteration of higher quality coffee to qualify it as a commodity coffee for the Hamburg Exchange lends itself to the same

interpretation. One has first to create coffee as a single, predictably reliable, familiar commodity, not as many puzzling coffees. On that basis the coffee commodity can later develop into many differentiated coffee commodities. The progression, in this reading, is anarchy, simplification, standardization, and finally articulation within a system of producer/distributor/user integration.

In nineteenth-century accounts such as *Capital* we are still in the simplification phase of commodity production and consumption in which there is a band of uses of commodities indifferently useful to different purchaser/consumers. This phenomenon can mislead the unwary reader into taking the uses of commodities as "naturally" generic. It is only later in the history of commodity form, when the intervention of producers into the relations of consumption becomes socially manifest, that we are forced to break down the broad category of utility (or use-value) into such subtypes as potential, quasi, and integral services. To have done so in Victorian times would have added an inexactness directly into the logical structure of economic theory, an essentially speculative component. For us not to do so now is to ignore the real world development of commodity form in the ensuing century and a quarter.[13]

As suggested, "the Market" is the abstraction that best reflects a situation in which a producer, limited by his or her productive abilities and the primitiveness of distribution conduits and relatively ignorant of the precise services needed by the eventual customer, simply sends goods out into the "void," there to be taken up by anyone who finds the band of their services acceptable and comes to prefer them because of their predictable uniformity. In an economic world still preoccupied with moving away from precommodity economic "anarchy" a relatively unadministered, unspecialized market seems most apt. Looked at in that way one can see that this market abstraction, still the foundation abstraction of so much economic writing, is profoundly inadequate when we have to analyze today's infinitely more articulated relationships between modern products, their producers, their distribution modes, and their final uses.

Analytically speaking, the classic market, or more specifically the whole genera of utility theories of "natural" demand operating in a market, represents an extrapolation of these bands of historically rooted generic services into a single abstract, generic, socially and culturally transcendent service or utility function. In that sense, those theories do injustice to the workings of a modern economy.

It is this willy-nilly extrapolation that, I suspect, has given rise to the plethora of narratives purporting to make empirical sense of the Jevons/Walras microeconomics of demand. There are obvious differences

cited in the narratives built around, say, Marshall's "wants and their satisfaction," Jevon's "final degree of utility," Bentham's "felicific tone," the textbook's "marginal utility," Pareto's "ophelimity," and Walras's "maximization of satisfaction," but these are stories trying to make sense of a deeply paradoxical theory of demand, combining a particularly demanding logic of utility with a spectacularly inarticulate conception of that same utility. In retrospect, it is clear that the very abstractness of the desired utility logic must cause every apparent tale to run into the sort of philosophic tangles we find in such Anselmian narrative devices as "perfect knowledge," "perfect market," "perfect equilibrium," and "full" opportunity cost.[14]

In our contemporary phase of commodity form, the historical evolution of commodities has led to articulated quasi services. These are typically complemented by the producing firm, which offers the needed quasi services at a later time and requiring new payments. Or this complementarity may be provided by other firms, by distributors (as in the credit system), or by the government. The point, of course, is that as a historical materialist Marx himself would have been forced to recharacterize use-value in some equivalent analytical way to take account of the historical evolution of commodity form.

Implications for the Theory of Property

Both the neoclassical pioneers and Marx wrote during the historical time period in which modern private property came to full development, and their formulation of microeconomics is very much connected to this and limited by it. The economic universe we live in today does not fit that private property template, although we contemporaries tend to think and act as if it did, in spite of the fact that quite fundamental property relations have been changing not in spite of but because of the exigencies of contemporary capitalism. In truth, modern capitalism rejects private property, except at the rhetorical level, and actually requires and operates within a system of already socialized or quasi-collective property.

What we call modern private property appears to have developed only very slowly from perhaps the fifteeenth century on, but it did not come into full social and legal flower until the first quarter of the nineteenth century in Britain and France, perhaps a generation later in the United States, and with analogous lags elsewhere. When we speak of a society and economy organized around private property we normally understand certain features to be thoroughly embodied in the law, business practices,

and related social activities as they bear on land and other productive (and personal) goods. To wit: (A) the land, money, or goods, that is, the property in question, is fully in the possession of the owner and/or on his or her authority is in the delegated possession of another. The decisive shift toward so-called modern private property comes with (B), under which, subject to only minimal restrictions, the owner may alienate the property or any of its services as he or she solely chooses. Sale, gift, bequest, rental, lease, and other forms of the transfer of property or its services fall within this rubric. (C) Any and all yields from the property, or liabilities, fall to the owner, as with the fruit from one's tree or the output from one's machinery or the damage inflicted by one's dog. Finally, (D) there is a title to the property, that is, there is a legally and customarily recognized procedure by means of which the property attributes A, B and C are guaranteed and protected by the reigning political authority. Obviously, there are variations in the property features if the property is owned by a partnership or even a (premodern) corporation, but these don't radically modify A,B,C,D.

As indicated, it is according to point B that we generally characterize "modern" private property, and it is this feature that the neoclassical and classical economists seized upon in their conception of the exchange of commodities. It was really only in the nineteenth century that the alienability of private property became fully developed. The social form of this is the "free market," wherein all manner and types of property may be fully "sold," that is, all property and its services may at the discretion of the old owner and new purchaser be exchanged and all claims to the property are transferred without restriction from the seller to the purchaser.

This, of course, represents an enormous change in social practices from the previous periods of human history. As Marx so bitterly puts it in the *Manifesto,* all human bonds formerly held sacred and inviolable were replaced by "the cash nexus." Before the Jacksonian era in the United States, before the Revolution in France, and somewhat earlier in Britain, the uses to which owners could put some important kinds of private property were severely restricted, and those restrictions remained in force even when the property in question was sold or bequeathed. Until the French Revolution shopkeepers were normally compelled to sell staples such as bread at "fair prices"; some employers were socially required to pay "fair wages." Even as late as the 1870s in the United States, there was a widespread public expectation that an employer "owed" some sort of guaranteed tenure of employment at "fair wages" to his employees; it was precisely the threat to this custom that led to the great U.S. railroad workers' uprising of 1877 (Yellen [1936] 1974 : 3ff., especially 12). Cer-

tain classes of rural dwellers retained residual rights in the land of others for firewood gathering, winter grazing or browsing, pond or lake fishing, and ice cutting. Naturally, this evidence of an earlier property system declined very slowly, retaining some importance well into the nineteenth century.

Analogously, point C was often hedged; others might lay claim to part of a crop (gleaning the residue left after the harvest perhaps), the game found on the land, and so forth. It was again only in the nineteenth century that the last important remnants of others' claims to the fruits or products of ostensibly private property fell away and that all four property attributes became fully and socially enacted.[15]

If we have this paradigm in mind, the transfer of a car from manufacturer to purchaser doesn't fit. The new owner of the car, as expected under a private property system, now enjoys A and D, but B doesn't quite hold and neither does C. As we saw in a different context, not all of the services of the car have been fully alienated to the new "owner." They are not now his or her property to freely and exclusively enjoy; to enjoy those that stretch beyond the ten to twenty thousand mile mark will require the assistance of the company at some future time (e.g., for tune-ups or spare parts). And, even more significant, the owner will require the assistance and cooperation, and the money to pay for them, of petroleum, tire, insurance, and other institutions. Similarly, the auto manufacturer may be held liable for injuries caused by the vehicle.

In these two important senses, the sale or transfer of the integral services of the car occurs over a period of time, and until that period has elapsed the new owner has only partial "ownership" of the services of his or her property. Analytically, the transformation of some of the quasi services of the car into integral services is not under the exclusive control and disposition of the owner of the car. In short, by shifting our perspective from the unqualified or integral service, we see that the nature of ownership has been altered in an obviously significant way both in law and in economics.

It may be that continuing liability is less important outside, say, the automobile and pharmaceutical industries. But whenever sale/purchase transfers only quasi services stipulation B is not satisfied and we are therefore not confronting classic private property but something importantly different. The practices surrounding quasi services indicate a sort of collective, collectivized, or partially socialized property. Obviously, a whole new meaning must be attached to those otherwise familiar words. During the sale/purchase state the car manufacturer does not "own the car," but does clearly continue to "own" at least some of its potential services.

Thus, when we pass from the car as simple physical object and look to see the sort of social-material relations in which it is embedded, it is evident that some of the key property features of the car, some of its services, are shared in a quite familiar way between producer/seller and consumer/purchaser—even though they've ostensibly been sold.

The concept of quasi services also lends us some insight into a subtle but powerful tendency for the provision of investment capital to become deeply socialized even as its earnings remain definitively private and exclusive.[16]

We have already discussed the phenomenon of consumer advances within the sale/purchase relationship, but the subject will repay the effort of further analysis. Here, the advent of quasi-socialized or quasi-collectivized property fundamentally alters the very logic of investment.

As pointed out earlier, one normally pays more for a modern commodity than its actual integral services would warrant. One pays for quasi services that remain under the effective control of the seller. And then one pays a second time to bring about their transfer to the buyer. The potential services will not be transferred to the purchaser until he or she lays out further monies to purchase the keyboard, get on the Internet, or acquire additional software. Note that the difference in price between the integral services actually transferred and the potential services that will become available later is not unfounded, at least insofar as the more powerful PC represents more extensive engineering and higher manufacturing costs. But at the same time further expenditures must be made to acquire those potential services. Here one both advances monies to the manufacturer/seller and incurs an effective lien to pay further monies later.

One wants to say that the purchaser/consumer "invests" that particular part of the purchase price, and in one precise respect that is just what one does. One advances a sum of money, which leads to a return at a later time. But, just as in modern property, where we saw the traditional ensemble of its four attributes split apart, something like the same thing occurs here vis-à-vis the normal progression we expect of an investment, namely, that X invests and normally gets a return. Here X invests but Y also gets a return.[17]

In this sense, the PC itself, though sold, still functions like classic Marxist constant capital. That is, it is the material subject that will be altered by the producing actions of the producer/seller.[18]

In each case "our" consumer product and at least a portion of the money tied up in it provide the material subject for the further profitable producing activities of the producer/seller. Given these quite significant economic and other productive relationships it would appear warranted

to say that some of the investment expenditures made for the commodity in question are not fully "private"; by virtue of the consumer/purchaser's advances they are partially socialized. From the advance of monies by others, the producer/seller reaps a return.

Of course, the purchaser/consumer is not legally constrained to make those additional outlays, but in the normal, usual case he or she must make them so as not to lose the value of the initial advance. Thereby the purchase/state also comprises, as we have seen, liens upon the future income of the purchaser/consumer. It is the combination of the advance of value to the producer/seller and the fact that those liens fall to the latter's advantage that leads us to say that the investment process has been partially socialized. Obviously, the conventional connotation we attach to the term *socialized* (fully social), which sharply contrasts with *privatized* (fully private), has to be rethought. Here *socialized* simply means that the processes that provide investment funds and the processes that will yield a further profit to the producer/seller have both "burst the integument" of a purely private property.

The producer/seller gets returns without making advances, and the purchaser/consumer gets liens against his or her future income instead of returns on the investment. This is doubly interesting, even paradoxical, when we consider how "the morality of investing" is treated in the history of economic thought. There is a whole tradition of theorizing, which includes writers as varied as Nassau Senior, J. S. Mill, and Alfred Marshall, that links investment to the "denial of satisfaction" or "waiting" attendant upon "saving" and thus provides what is argued to be an ethical basis for a return on investment. This position cannot be sustained in a modern economy in which the provision of investment has taken on a process character involving advances and saving from a populace whose claims to the return on that investment are subordinated to advantageously placed "free riders" both individual and institutional. Thus, we see here an extension and deepening of the private and exclusive right of the producer/seller to a return on someone else's investment that we would not otherwise expect on the basis of a classic private property system.

Commodity Fetishism and "False Experience"

The present analysis underlines what I think is a key feature of our modern society, the phenomenon of "false experience." The term seems to be a contradiction; one can falsely judge an experience or falsely identify the

source of an experience, but how can there be, purely and simply, a false experience?

This subject is actually an extension and deepening of a phenomenon pointed out by Marx under the rubric of commodity fetishism and can perhaps be best approached by recapping his views. In the first volume of *Capital* he devotes a lengthy exposition to what he calls the fetishism of commodities. He argues that the while commodities are the product of dense nets of social relationships those relationships are pushed to the background of our perceptions and tend to be replaced by the things themselves. We say that "the factory" produces the goods when it is the people who work there who do so. Or conceive that "technology is irresistible" in such a way that we block out the fact that the imperative to alter technology has social, political, and economic roots that are at least as powerful as the technological ones and often more so. Here we come to see the world as furnished with objectified but fictive relationships between things instead of, as we should, a world made up of the social relationships of the producers and users of those things.[19]

If I read him correctly, Marx does not lay any particular stress on the fact that social relationships themselves can be fetishized into false ones. He appears to limit himself to the point that some social relationships tend to be erased by relations between things. But our expanded analytical apparatus, which stresses the greater social character of modern commodity form, indicates that commodity fetishism now has both a greater amplitude and a finer grain.

Under modern commodity form social relations are sometimes directly distorted into fictive social relations or even sometimes created out of whole cloth. Thus, the fetish character of modern commodity form takes on more than symbolic or communicative reality, enacting new, ongoing, and causally significant ensembles of social relationships. These distortions and creations do not occur independent of the sort of fetishism described by Marx but extend far beyond it.

Modern producers/sellers often seize upon existing aspects of our culture and social relationships and distort them to suit their purposes. For example, and as previously described, modern marketing typically seizes upon the preexisting inclination of some part of the consuming public to identify itself with some favorable characteristic or other, such as being "adult," youthful, avant-garde, sexy, exotic, or affluent. This advertising does not rest on generalized or universal human propensities, as its theorists often claim. As we now know so vividly from the public controversies over tobacco, selective advertising is directed at what are imagined to

be especially volatile potential consumers—in that case adolescents. In short, the producer/advertiser's strategy is to create new social behavior within an especially susceptible target group whose example will encourage others to emulate them and thus yield material advantages to the firm, especially to the degree that the greater profits generated through this process can be subsequently used to expand the market.[20]

If the commodities so advertised achieve the level of a mass market, they create further industrial, financial, and symbolic social relationships in the form of a major industry, its wealth, its influence, and so forth, which then underwrites the continued social behavior on the part of "consumers" that was the goal. Here fetishism becomes self-creating and self-expanding. Thus, we do not merely (and falsely) imagine that smoking is a consumer-led phenomenon; we actually experience it. The tobacco industry can claim that it is only serving the desires of part of the public and antismoking and related ordinances and campaigns are negative, puritanical, and at their limit anti–civil libertarian.

One must stress here that the dynamic of the fetish is only triggered by symbolic means, by advertising. The hoped for aim is to create a body of social-material relationships that will "take off" well beyond the direct effects of the advertising and then maintain themselves long after the advertising campaign is terminated. Something of this nature is involved in all brand name marketing, but the point is that the tobacco industry has created an enduring demand for its products, an actual sector of society that behaviorally and in other ways materially reproduces itself and influences others' behavior, not merely their ideas.

A less frequently discussed but equally important fetish is enacted by the automobile industry. In public policy discussions about transportation, mass transit is typically contrasted with the automobile as the social versus the private. We understand the first to have a (good) social character while the second is only "private" and "individualistic." But the truth, brought out in the features of the modal sale/purchase states for autos, is that a transport system based on autos is no more private than one based on buses or trains. One's use of a car is deeply conditioned by its immersion in a system of *social* expenses and dependencies. Ironically, what is really "private" about an auto-based system is that the bulk of the investment necessary to bring private profit to the auto companies is provided by the public, both in the expense of building and maintaining roads and in the costs incurred to change the vehicle's potential services into actual ones. Thus, the privateness or individualism socially associated with the auto represents a false or fetish relationship between the driving public and the industry. Here the fetish is wrongly imagined to be keyed to the

vehicle itself. Of course, there are undoubtedly those who are infatuated with the fetish perception that their car is "manly" or "sporty." That's the sort of thing discussed in Marx. But at the level of transportation policy discussion, either by the professionals or the public, the fetish lies in the distortion of the social relationship between public and industry, not individual and car.

In both of these examples we find false or fetishized social relationships, "false" not because they don't exist but because their origin, growth, and character are fundamentally manipulated into existence and then become socially/materially self-sustaining. Here a purely commercial phenomenon manages to create a social "fact" that will depict itself as "natural." Thus, "we"—society—come to experience a humanly engineered and managed phenomenon as a spontaneous, entirely natural sort of thing.

This raises a most interesting area of discussion, namely, the way in which in a modern society our very experience can be falsified. Note that I differ from postmodern views here and also from an intellectual strain traditional in Marxism. It is not false ideology that is at the center here, nor "false consciousness," but experiences that are genuinely bogus. That we falsely render these experiences in fictive or ideological symbols is consequence not cause. The fact creates the idea not the other way around. Because of the burdens it imposes on our private purse, we falsely experience a socially organized, auto-based transport system as private. This falsification of experience obviously goes beyond purely commercial sorts of things; it is a societywide feature, a system property, I would argue, of a society whose contours are more and more socially fabricated and less and less of spontaneous origin.

In a parallel case in the United States, for example, many white people actually experience their own social superiority to nonwhites. They experience—not "imagine" or "ideologize"—nonwhites as possessing the indubitable marks of social inferiority, as less educated, less healthy, and less wealthy, with higher levels of social pathology and with "less educated" customs and speech patterns. This experience is confirmed and deepened by the police, who treat nonwhites like inferiors; by the municipality, which undercollects trash in nonwhite districts; by employers, who typically hire nonwhites for menial tasks, and even by the media, which treat nonwhites as exotic—commendably exotic, perhaps, but exotic and therefore "other" all the same. Accordingly, to think that nonwhites are inferior is not ultimately and effectively rooted in false ideas or via ideologies of advantage such as "whiteness"; it comes of reading and reacting to the content of our social experience. One requires critical,

independent-minded reflection to reject the racialism taught by one's own experience.

Insofar as society evolves from the spontaneous sort of thing celebrated by Popper and Hayek toward being made up more and more of ensembles of mutually supportive social relationships enacted by business, the media, the mass political parties, and other institutions interested in fabricating what C. Wright Mills used to call "official versions of reality," we have less and less reason to believe that "experience," "common sense,","public opinion," and even "expert advice" stand outside fetishized reality. This involves more than just rejecting the older progress myths. It is not merely that society is failing to get better and better but that we cannot rely on the claim that society is self-correcting or self-equilibrating. In short, a trajectory of human regress is just as likely, and perhaps more so, than any of the alternatives.

With the rise and spread of modern commodity form, false experience itself becomes a major, often dominant social phenomenon. If, as I believe, the modern labor force—the labor-power of society—is produced within commodity form, then the phenomenon of fetishized or fictive social experience already represents a major, obviously dangerous conundrum, namely, of the shrinking of the spontaneous dimensions of society and the expansion of an importantly engineered society and with it the widespread phenomenon of experience itself, which is false.