

Demystifying Marx's Concept of the Commodity and Fetishization

Throughout *Capital*, Marx refers to commodities and the value they have, focusing on their mysterious characteristics and fetish-like nature. These two ideas are intertwined and are key to understanding value. Marx argues that commodities are mysterious because we perceive the subjective social relations imprinted on them as objective, a misconception that is amplified through the fetishization that results when products are exchanged. This essay will analyze the misconception that makes commodities mysterious, their fetish-like nature and the importance of seeing past it to understand value in the ultimate pursuit of regulating production.

Marx claims that commodities have a mysterious character, implying that there is something the general public does not fully witness. He explains that commodities are mysterious because “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” (Marx, 321). The misconception of the social labor embedded in products as objective is the source of their mystery. The social relations that laborers have are represented through the products they create. For example, a miner may never meet a blacksmith, but the pickaxe the blacksmith creates will meet the miner and act as a social tether between them. This is a result of the imprinting caused by labor. The misconception of these social relations as inherent properties of commodities is what leads to their mystery.

The mysterious characteristics of commodities are further amplified by the fetish-like nature that commodities have, which Marx believes must be seen through to understand value. Marx draws a parallel to the fetishes in the religious world, where objects are valued with their own life and have relations both with other products and with humans themselves. Marx argues

that commodities gain this same fetishism when they are exchanged in the market. The fetishism commodities gain further obscures the social aspect imprinted on them by the labor used to create them, and their mystery deepens (Marx, 323). Marx argues that this nature is very important to understanding value in the market. He reveals that “in the midst of all the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange-relations between the products, the labour-time socially necessary for their production forcibly asserts itself like an overriding law of Nature” (Marx, 323). Regardless of the ever-changing relationships between products, their value is always rooted in labor. By attributing this value to commodities as an inherent value, society conceals the exploitation and identity of the laborers. One must see past the mystery that fetishism adds to commodities by imbuing products with life and relation and accept that value is rooted in labor despite surface-level changes.

Understanding commodities’ true source of value is crucial for settling a plan and regulating material production. Marx holds material goods as the foundation society is built on, referring to material production as the “life-process of society” (Marx, 327). Marx claims that this process 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” (Marx, 327). Demystification of material production is needed to regulate it. This demystification is directly tied to seeing through the confusion caused by the fetish-like nature of commodities. The fetishes that disguise value as inherent to objects must be dismantled, allowing laborers to consciously recognize value’s origin in human labor and set up plans for regulation.

In *Capital*, Marx explores the nature of commodities, revealing that they hold social weight and act as relations between laborers. Viewing this social power as an objective characteristic of the product leads to a sense of mystery. This mystery deepens when the product

is exchanged in the market, where it gains a life of its own and acts as a relation between people, similar to religious fetishes. To understand the true source of value—rooted in social labor—we must see past the fetishism that exchange bestows upon products and recognize the social relations embedded within them. This understanding of value's true origin beyond fetishism is needed to demystify material production and allows laborers to plan and regulate.

The Rise of Manufacture and the Fall of Interpersonal Dynamics

In Marx's history of Capital, Marx labels the starting point of the transition to capital as the feudal arrangements of serfdom and guilds, which tied laborers to the land and production. As these systems dissolved, the laborer became increasingly alienated from the means of production, forcing the laborer to sell themselves as a commodity. This transition culminated in manufacture, where labor was fragmented and workers were reduced to mere parts of a machine. These changes pulled entire families into the workforce, thus eroding previous family dynamics and turning the family into an economic unit. Yet, Marx also saw this as potential groundwork for a future where family structures could be more egalitarian (Marx, 415). This essay will explore how the dissolution of feudal arrangements and the rise of manufacture resulted in a capital-driven mindset, which changed interpersonal relationships and family dynamics.

Marx outlines how the breakdown of feudal systems and the rise of manufacture were critical in driving the transition to capital by turning the laborer into a commodity. Marx describes the basis of the transition to capitalism as “the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production“ (Marx, 432). The process of separating laborers from means of production is the driving force in the transition to capitalist society, with the dissolution of serfdom and guilds serving as critical steps in this separation. Under serfdom, laborers had a direct connection to the land they worked on and the products they created. Its

dissolution severed this connection, forcing men to become laborers who sold themselves as a commodity. With their connection to their product severed, laborers now relied on guilds for regulation and guarantees. The dissolving of guilds robbed laborers of these securities provided by feudal society. This loss of security left laborers in a vulnerable position, which manufacture took full advantage of. Manufacture divided labor to increase productivity; in doing so, it also separated laborers from the act of labor itself. As Marx states, regardless of how labor is divided, the final result is “a productive mechanism whose parts are human beings” (Marx, 390). This division of labor into a mechanism makes it so the laborer can now only do effective work in the environment of manufacture. The reduction of laborers to parts in a machine and their reliance on the mechanisms of manufacture robbed laborers of their autonomy, making them properties of capital accumulation.

The shift away from the securities of feudal arrangements, as well as the reduction of the laborer to an object, fundamentally changed how individuals acted and related to each other. As society transitioned towards the isolated and capital-oriented mindset of manufacture, people’s relationships became increasingly impersonal and focused around economic gain. Marx describes how the division of labor in workshops transformed laborers into “independent commodity producers, who acknowledge no other authority but that of competition, of the coercion exerted by the pressure of their mutual interests” (Marx, 395). The competitive mindset introduced by capitalist society broke down traditional bonds and connections and built up a society focused around capital gain.

The capital-driven mindset and competitive society not only altered social relations but also transformed family dynamics. With parents becoming commodities of the capitalist system, driven by competition, they began to exploit their own children for labor. Marx attributes this

behavior to “the capitalistic mode of exploitation which, by sweeping away the economic basis of parental authority, made its exercise degenerate into a mischievous misuse of power” (Marx, 415). With the parents' loss of their means of production through the dissolution of feudal systems, and motivated by the capital mindset that manufacture provided, parents began to exploit their children unchecked. These changes transformed the home from a caring and nurturing environment to one that prioritized capital gain and survival. However, despite the negative effects on the home environment, Marx also saw potential for growth with this new inclusive workforce. Drawing women and children into the labor force also created “a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes” (Marx, 415). Marx saw this shift as groundwork for a future where gender roles evolved and family structures became less hierarchical and more equitable.

In *Capital*, Marx explains the roles that serfdom and guilds played in feudal society, providing laborers with a direct connection to their products, means of production, and established regulations and relationships with employers. Marx outlines how the dissolution of these feudal structures initiated a gradual process of alienation, further separating laborers from production until the rise of manufacture divided labor and ultimately commodified the laborer himself. This transformation not only altered social and economic relations but also reshaped family dynamics, as the lack of connection to production undermined traditional parental authority. Despite his criticism of the disruptive effects on families, Marx also highlighted the potential for these changes to pave the way for a more egalitarian family structure in a capitalist society. By understanding this evolution, we see how Marx connects economic shifts to broader social transformations, emphasizing the dual impact of capitalism on both labor and family life.