

Notes from Marxism - 2

The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof

- In Karl Marx's critique of political economy, commodity fetishism is the perception of certain relationships (especially production and exchange) not as relationships among people, but as social relationships among things.
- The theory of commodity fetishism is presented in the first chapter of Capital .
- In a capitalist society, social relations between people—who makes what, who works for whom, the production-time for a commodity, et cetera—are perceived as social relations among objects; depending on the social function of the exchange, objects acquire a certain form.
- On the market, the commodities of each individual producer appear in a depersonalized form as separate exemplars of a given type of commodity regardless of who produced them, or where, or in which specific conditions thus obscuring the social relations of production.
- MARX TURNS TO FETISHISM to make sense of the apparently magical quality of the commodity.
- “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”
- Fetishism in anthropology refers to the primitive belief that godly powers can inhere in inanimate things (e.g., in totems).
- Marx borrows this concept to make sense of what he terms "commodity fetishism.”
- When a piece of wood is turned into a table through human labor, its use-value is clear and, as product, the table remains tied to its material use. However, as soon as the table "emerges as commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness".
- The connection to the actual hands of the labourer is severed as soon as the table is connected to money as the Universal Equivalent for exchange.
- “It is however, just this ultimate money form of the world of commodities that actually conceals , instead of disclosing the social character of private labor, the the social relations between the individual producers.”
- People in a capitalist society thus begin to treat Commodities as if value inhered in the objects themselves, rather than in the amount of real labor expended to produce

the object.

- What is, in fact, a social relation between people (between capitalists and exploited labourers) instead assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things."
- This effect is caused by the fact that, in a capitalist society, the real producers of Commodities remain largely invisible. We only approach their products "through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products".
- We access the products of the proletariat through the exchange of money with those institutions that glean profit from the labor of the proletariat. Since we only ever relate to those products through the exchange of money, we forget the "secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of Commodities", that is labor.
- It is... precisely this finished form of the world of commodities-the money form—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly" .
- In capitalist society, gold and then paper money become "the direct incarnation of all human labor"), much as in primitive societies the totem becomes the direct incarnation of godhead.
- Through this process, "Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way; they becomes alienated because their own relations of production assume a material shape which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action".
- Although value ultimately accrues because of human labor, people in a capitalist system are led to believe that they are not in control of the market forces that appear to exist independently of any individual person.
- Marx also talks about how there existed a personal dependence form in the feudal society where labor did not need to take a fantastic form and therefore was not disguised and was visible as social relations between individuals.

- References

- Wikipedia
- purdue.edu
- marxist.org
- Capital, Karl Marx
- Rivkin and Ryan

- Suggested reading

- The Capital, Karl Marx
- Rivkin and Ryan
- marxist.org