

# Commodity Fetishism: From Marx to Contemporary Society

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## Abstract

*The concept of ideology plays a significant role in social and political thinking. There has been a shift in the critique of ideology today. For Marx the principal focus was commodity fetishism, which the tendency to misrecognize the true status of exchange value and of identifying it as an objective feature rather than seeing it as a subjective feature. The later scholars of Marxist thought, including Louis Althusser, assert that the examination of ideology has transitioned to focus on the subject. This paper aims to elucidate how the prevailing consumerism within contemporary capitalist society serves as a manifestation of the concept of commodity fetishism.*

**Keywords:** *capitalism, commodity fetishism, labour theory of value, consumerism.*

## Introduction

The capitalist system is defined by two features. First, it is a commodity producing system, in which goods are produced for the purpose of selling, with an emphasis on the maximization of profit or capital accumulation. Secondly, it is capitalist in the sense that the means of production are in the hands of the capitalists who also employ workers (Brewer, 1984). Commodities thus become one of the defining characteristics of the capitalist system. In analysing the system of capitalism Marx coined the term “fetishism of commodities” or rather as we call it today “commodity fetishism”. In this paper I offer an analysis of commodity fetishism and how it manifests in modern day society. I will start by briefly discussing Marx’s Labour Theory of value, particularly notions of the use value and exchange value. In the subsequent section I will discuss how commodity fetishism comes about. In the last section I briefly look at how commodity fetishism occurs in contemporary society.

*Marx's labour Theory of Value: Use value and exchange value*

Marx in *Capital* (1977) begins his analysis with commodity and asserts that it has two fundamental traits. First a commodity has a use value and secondly it has an exchange value. The former implies that they satisfy or fulfil some needs. The latter implies that they have a quality of being exchangeable for other things (Brewer, 1984, p. 22). Furthermore, this serves as the foundation for his theory of labour theory of value, which seeks to elucidate the social relations that exist within a capitalist system. A commodity can be loosely defined as something that can be exchanged for other commodities and is of use to us. Marx puts it in this manner: “a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (Marx, 1977, p. 02). In other words, a commodity is something that has use-value and as such it is to be regarded as an item produced for the purpose of satisfying human needs or wants. A cell phone for instance is produced to satisfy some need, be it for making phone calls, taking photos, etc. That is one aspect of a commodity which is called its use value.

*The utility of a thing makes it a use-value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity. A commodity, such as iron, corn, or a diamond, is therefore, so far as it is a material thing, a use-value, something useful. This property of a commodity is independent of the amount of labour required to appropriate its useful qualities. When treating of use-value, we always assume to be dealing with definite quantities, such as dozens of watches, yards of linen, or tons of iron. The use-values of commodities furnish the material for a special study, that of the commercial knowledge of commodities. Use-values become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth. In the form of society we are about to consider, they are, in addition, the material depositories of exchange-value. (Marx, 1977, p. 8)*

Every commodity is defined by its use-value, that is its capacity to satisfy needs and desires. Put differently, “a use value is a good whose material properties are designed to satisfy a human need. It is a means to some end.” (Winkler, 2024, p. 27). For example, cellphone, chair, clothes, etc. Without the use value the commodity would not be produced. Moreover, “not every use value is a commodity, for use values which are created naturally, that are freely available or are not exchanged for money on the marketplace have no exchange value” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 16). For instance, sunlight, air, etc. These are useful to satisfy our needs – we need and use the air for breathing – however they cannot be commodified or exchanged for money. Essentially, the use value of an object is

determined by its physical properties, i.e., those made by the producer rather than those it possesses naturally – except perhaps for things like the sun, for example.

Exchange value on the other hand, embodies a relationship of equivalence between commodities (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 17). Marx was interested in establishing what is it that makes commodities equivalent or exchangeable. For Marx, “what creates the relationship of exchange, then, is not a physical relationship between goods but a historically specific social one” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 17). Exchange value can be explained in the following manner:

*If x exchanges for y ( $x \sim y$  say), then  $2x \sim 2y$ . If, in addition,  $u \sim v$ , then  $(u \text{ and } x) \sim (v \text{ and } y)$ , and so on. But there is an unlimited number of relationships satisfying these properties, for example, weight or volume. (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 17)*

The exchange-value thus is the ability of objects or commodities to be exchangeable for other objects. More precisely, objects that have use-value acquire exchange-value when they can be exchangeable with other objects. Moreover, the values in use are contingent, that is they changing with time and place. For instance, let's say 1 kg of flour can be exchanged for 2 bags of apples, or 4 bags of strawberries. What this means is the 1 kg bag of flour has more than one exchange values, that is, it is equivalent to 2 bags of apples or also it is worth 4 bags of strawberries. Moreover, exchange value implies that different objects can be replaced by other objects, in their different quantities.

The exchange of these commodities occurs within the system of free market. For Marx we should not consider the markets as merely just the domain of exchange, but also as something that reflects the social relations in capitalism (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, for Marx in these social relations we get to see that labour is what underpins the equivalence between commodities. It has been established that throughout his analysis Marx has argued that in capitalism we create our material conditions through labour, “it is axiomatic that throughout history people have lived by their labour: if everyone stops working, no society can survive beyond a few days” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 17).

To reiterate, in a capitalist system products produced through labour are referred to as commodities that are exchanged in the market. Moreover, this production through labour brings about class domination, where one class (proletariat) sells their labour power to the other class (bourgeoisie). “To distinguish the workers from their ability or capacity to work, Marx called the latter *labour power*, and its performance or application *labour*” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005). Marx defines labour power as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description” (Marx, 1977). Essentially, the proletariat sells their labour power to the bourgeoisie, and through labour they produce

commodities. The value of labour-power is ascertained, like any other commodity, by the labour-time required for its production (Marx, 1977). To add, what makes capitalism interesting is that labour power is also considered as a form of a commodity and as a commodity labour power possess use value, which is to create objects or commodities that others will purchase and use.

Critical to the exchanging of commodities, is money as a general equivalent. Money serves a crucial role, i.e., “it is a measure of value, a standard of price and a means of payment or exchange” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005). Each commodity is taken to be equivalent to commodities in the market, in their own specific quantitative ratios (Bellofiore, 2018). The commodity possesses both use value and exchange value; while the latter is not apparent in the commodity itself, it is manifested externally in money as the “universal equivalent” (Bellofiore, 2018). By universal equivalent Marx meant that money serves as a special object with a universal purchasing power. In other words, money stands as a representative for all the commodities. Marx expresses it in the following manner:

*The simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C-M-C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of the money back again into commodities; or selling in order to buy. But alongside of this form we find another specifically different form: M-C-M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the change of commodities back again into money; or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital. (Marx, 1977, p. 104)*

Marx introduced the formula C-M-C to explain how exchange occurs in the market. C- standing for commodity and M representing Money. He argues within the circulation of commodities, these commodities are transformed into money. And that money is turned into commodities again. Consider the following as an example, let us say I own a smart phone as my commodity, but I no longer want it, instead I want a new laptop. Now for me to possess the new laptop I must sell the cell phone. This can be represented in this manner C-M. Thus, I have exchanged the cell phone (C) for money (M). Then the second phase of Marx’s formula is M-C. The money I have received when selling my cell phone, I use it to purchase a new laptop. That is, M-C, in other words the money I have obtained is exchanged for a new commodity. In essence, the formula C-M-C demonstrates that commodities are sold in order to purchase other commodities, and this is how circulation of commodities is sustained.

Marx also mentioned another formula, which is M-C-M, which stands for the transformation of money into commodities, then the change of those commodities back into money again. This can be simply understood as the act of buying in order to sell. Moreover, the money that circulates here is called “capital” (Marx, 1977, p. 89). Let us consider the following example to illustrate this, let’s

say I own a small local supermarket, I buy essential products in bulks such as milk, bread etc from a wholesaler (i.e., M-C), to sell them at my supermarket. These commodities I purchased from the wholesaler, will transform back to money when I sell them to customers (i.e., C-M). Thus, I would have accumulated capital. Marx further asserts,

*As the conscious representative of this movement, the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts and to which it returns. The expansion of value, which is the objective basis or main-spring of the circulation M-C-M, becomes his subjective aim, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will. Use-values must therefore never be looked upon as the real aim of the capitalist; neither must the profit on any single transaction. The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at. (Marx, 1977, p. 107)*

Within the scenario of M-C-M emerges the capitalist, i.e., the one who accumulates money through buying and selling of commodities. The capitalist is more concerned with the expansion of value. He becomes an embodiment of capital, as Marx claims that the capitalist becomes “capital personified and endowed with consciousness and will” (Marx, 1977). The main objective of the capitalist is to accumulate capital and maximise profit. For example, let's again consider the example of purchasing commodities from wholesaler. Let's say I buy a loaf of bread for R10 and I sell it at my store for R15. I would have accumulated extra R5 as profit.

In this section I have briefly outline some of the key points in Marx's Labour Theory of Value. I have discussed how the capitalist system is characterised by the production of commodities and how these commodities arise from social relations. I further demonstrated the two traits that a commodity possesses, i.e., use value and exchange value. Moreover, I touched on how individuals can also sell their labour power to capitalists to get wages. And lastly, I briefly discussed money as a universal equivalent in the market. In the following section I discuss commodity fetishism.

### *1. Fetishism of commodities.*

The fetishism of commodities centres around the misconception of commodities once they enter the market or once they possess the exchange value. As alluded in the previous section, Marx believes that the exchanging of commodities in the market represents the social relations we find in capitalism. More specifically the fact that the relationship between workers as producers of objects becomes hidden. What we observe is rather a relationship between objects.

For example, what we observe is 2 loaves of bread= 5kg of sugar. “These social relations are further mystified when money enters into consideration, and everything is analysed in terms of price” (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005). Marx puts it in this manner,

*It is, however, just this ultimate money-form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers. When I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen, because it is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots compare those articles with linen, or, what is the same thing, with gold or silver, as the universal equivalent, they express the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society in the same absurd form. (Marx, 1977, pp. 49-50)*

This in essence describes the fetishism of commodities, where the relationship between the worker and products of labour is mystified and these products appear to be independent of their producers. Moreover, money acts as a mediator between these products, everything is considered in terms of its price. Let me briefly unpack how this phenomenon of commodity fetishism occurs. Marx states that,

*A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noonday, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was. (Marx, 1977, p. 47)*

Marx is arguing that at first glance we take objects that we have produced as simply objects for our use or consumption. If we just analyse a commodity in terms of its usefulness or use-value only, it will not appear to us as mysterious or complex. For instance, if I take wood and fashion a wooden spoon for cooking, I will take it as just an object that I use for cooking. However, Marx highlights that as soon as the product of labour attains an exchange value, that is where the mystery begins. Once that spoon acquires an exchanges value it transforms from just being a cooking spoon into a commodity in relation to other commodities. That is it attains a status of equivalence. For example, 1 wooden spoon= 2kg of potatoes. To put it differently, he asserts that a wooden spoon remains an ordinary

piece of wood unless it transforms into a commodity, that is when it transcends its use-value. The exchange-value is what gives objects the privilege to stand in relation with other commodities. Moreover, it is not the exchange value and the use-value that make the commodities 'queer' or mysterious as Marx asserts, rather the mystery lies in the fact that these commodities are considered to be in relation to each other naturally thus concealing the human labour behind the making of these commodities. In other words, the exchange value of a commodity embodies human labour. However, the worker cannot see that once the items he has made appear on the market. On the market, these items seem to lead a life of their own. In a sense that one item is exchangeable for another item, and this for another, etc. e.g. 1 wooden spoon=2kg of potatoes, 2kg of potatoes= 3 loaves of bread - and these relations of exchange in which they are caught appear to the worker to be mind-independent, i.e., not the result of his own work or labour. In other words, these relations are naturalized.

A fetish is a natural object that is thought to possess some supernatural power. Fetishism is a concept coined by historians and missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this was coined to describe what they considered the primitive stage of religion (Rehmann, 2013). The term in this sense refers to the practices of people carving objects and worshiping them with the belief that they possess supernatural powers. Rehmann (2013) makes an example of indigenous people in Cuba who had gold as a fetish, they had celebrations in its honour. In essence, fetishism is the misrecognition of reality. The fetishist takes something that is supersensuous or supernatural to have a mind-independent existence. Furthermore, it is to misrecognize the fact that the only reality is empirical reality or the material world and that the supersensuous or supernatural is a figment of our imagination; we falsely think the latter to have a mind-independent existence. Marx's application of this phenomenon is in his observations on how we regard commodities in the capitalist market. Thus Marx says:

*A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it 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. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and*

*the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So, it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx, 1977, pp. 47-48)*

To sum this section up, Marx's starting point in analysing the economic system of capitalism he starts by looking at how societies create their material conditions. In a capitalist society, humans produce objects that acquire use-value according to their usefulness, e.g., we create food from crops. Moreover, these objects that are produced are necessary for the continuing existence of the society (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004). Marx further introduced two concepts, namely, use-value and exchange value. The latter is the ability of an object to exchange with other objects, moreover, in this state objects can be quantified (for instance we can quantify land in hectares or bags of rice according to kilograms, etc.). The former, refers to the usefulness of an object and in this instance the objects cannot be quantified.

A key point to bear in mind is that an object only becomes classified as a commodity when it has an exchange value. In other words, an object becomes a commodity when it has both use-value and exchange-value. Use-value on its own is not a sufficient condition for an object to be a commodity because there are some objects that have use-value and are able to satisfy human's needs, but they cannot be exchanged for money on the market, these are objects that are provided by nature or freely available. For example, we cannot sell or purchase the air we breathe, however it is useful to us. Essentially, one could describe a commodity as something that is produced to satisfy human desires or needs and can also be sold or exchanged for another commodity. Commodity fetishism is the belief that commodities are inherently natural and have an existence of their own in the market, independent of humans. In other words, we are led to assume that commodities on the market have an independent existence (Heinrich, 2004).

Ben Fine and Saad-Filho in the book *Marx's Capital* (2004) assert that Marx seeks to provide an answer to the question of "what is that allows commodities to be equivalent in exchange?" They argue that "what creates the relationship of exchange, then, is not a physical relationship between goods but a historically specific social one" (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004). What then follows from this is that what all the commodities have in common is the fact that they are products of



human labour (Fine&Saad-Filho,2004). In other words, although commodities are characterised by their material/physical properties, i.e., they can be used for human consumption or use, their exchange value in the market is not determined by these properties, rather it is determined by social relations. Therefore, to answer Marx's question, the most fundamental trait that commodities have in common that allows them to be "equivalent in exchange" is the fact that they are products of labour (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004).

Additionally, one of the interesting features of capitalism is that labour power also becomes a commodity. Workers sell their labour power to the capitalist in exchange for wages. The worker sells labour power to the capitalist, who determines how that labour power should be exercised as labour to produce particular commodities (Fine, 2004). Workers, similar to produced commodities are in relation with one through the market or through the exchange of their products for money. For instance, we often purchase commodities without any knowledge of their producers or the production process (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004). Moreover, workers become alienated from their essence, on the labour market by treating his labour power as a thing to be exchange for some other thing. The worker objectifies his essence. In other words, when one sells his labour power in exchange for wages, their labour power becomes a commodity also.

Fine and Saad-Filho lament that in capitalism the worker in some instances is like a slave, since they have no control over the labour process or the product of labour (2004). The latter point is what Marx calls alienation, and it happens in four-folds which I will not discuss due to the scope of this paper. The essential point is that when one sells their labour power to the capitalist they become estranged to their product of labour. This is because that product does not belong to them and also when the product competes in the market it bears no recognition of its maker. Rather it appears independent of the maker and only in relation to other products. Furthermore, the irony in capitalist society is that as much as it comes with the freedom for one to choose not to sell their labour power, unlike other epochs (e.g. such as slavery when one did not really have much privilege), one is not really free to choose otherwise because the repercussions of not wanting to sell labour power (or to work) are much severe, i.e., the results are one ends up being ostracised from society. "For these reasons the workers under capitalism have been described as wage slaves, although the term is an oxymoron. You cannot be both slave and wage worker" (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004).

As much as the of commodities signifies the historical social relationships in capitalism, the relationship between workers and their products of labour remains to be a relationship between things, as argued above. These social relations are further mystified when money is factorised as a general equivalent, and everything

is analysed in terms of price (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004), this is what Marx termed fetishism of commodities.

*Everyone knows that the material used to make money (paper, metal, ink, etc.) is subject to wear and tear and that it is destined to be eventually destroyed. Yet we treat money as if its materiality were incorruptible, as if, instead of being subject to time, it were imperishable like the immaterial Forms of Plato's philosophy. The fetishistic tendency consists in hypostatizing its immaterial-social function. (Winkler, 2024, p. 27)*

We take money to be something that is supernatural and transcending the material world. It is as if it bears superior value beyond it being pieces of paper or metals that represent a certain value. For instance, how R200 note is taken as something that to possess supernatural powers. When I have the R200 note in my hand, it is not just a piece of paper imprinted R200, it means something beyond that. It represents my buying power.

*It is not without reason that Marx resorts to the anthropologist's notion of 'fetishism' in his analysis of capital. The fact is that people treat money as religious folk behave around their fetish. It is for them a natural thing endowed with supernatural powers. People are prepared to die for it or do the impossible, as they are for their fetish or their nation or in the name of their 'way of life' and so on – for anything, that is, that strikes them sublime. (Winkler, 2024, p. 27)*

Marx establishes a remarkable comparison between commodity fetishism and the religious devotion shown in medieval societies (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2005). Humanity has created the concept of God and this is rationalised through religion. In this instance, humans invented the image of God and believe God has independent existence outside humanity. This is similar to the relationship of exchange between commodities, it is also a product of human mind. Moreover, this relationship between commodities conceals the true nature of capitalism—which is that it is exploitative under the guise of free market. To be precise, the buying and selling of commodities does not reflect the reality or provide insight into the conditions under which they have entered the market, nor does it expose the exploitation of the labourers that produce these commodities for the capitalists. Marx expresses it in this manner,

*Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. (Marx & Engels, 1970)*

In this light, commodity fetishism can be made the basis of a theory of alienation or reification. Not only are the workers divorced from the control of the product and the process of producing it, but also the view of this situation is

normally distorted or at most partial. For both capitalists and workers, it appears that external powers exert this control, and not the social relations of production and their effects peculiar to capitalism. For example, the loss of employment or bankruptcy may be blamed on a thing or an impersonal force, as in the unfortunate breakdown of a machine, changes in consumer preferences, international competition or an economic crisis of whatever origin or cause (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004).

Commodity fetishism is transferring social properties or relations that humans have, into commodities (Brewer, 1984). I am saying social relations because in the market commodities are considered in relation to other commodities and the human behind the product is not considered i.e., commodities appear to have an inherent value in and of themselves. Moreover, the human that produced that commodity is alienated from the product of his labour. The same way a religious person asserts that they put more into God in order to empty themselves or relinquish themselves of the earthly desires, it is the same with the labourer the more they labour the more they are alienated from themselves and the products of their labour.

In the paper “Commodity fetishism”, Arthur Ripstein argues that the analogy that Marx makes between commodity fetishism and religious belief in God is one where the problem of religious fetishism is easier to come out of or to resolve, whereas the one of commodity fetishism is harder to come out of. He asserts, “if Marx is right, the mistake of fetishism is impossible to avoid in capitalist production” (Ripstein, 1987). Hypothetically, religious fetishism can be resolved when humans recognise that religion is the product of the human mind and also when the social conditions that make religion important are abolished. In the religious scenario the fetishism occurs at the level of thought. On the other hand, commodity fetishism occurs at practical level, the mystery arises when the products created by human hands are misrecognised for having transcendental qualities, as if they follow natural laws and not human norms.

I think the interesting observation within commodity fetishism is that even when we are aware of the illusion of capitalism, it is difficult to dispel the fetish. Unlike, in the religious fetishism, when one becomes conscious of the illusions of religion, they can easily disavow the fetish, for instance if one comes to terms with the fact that maybe there is no God or that there are no empirical justifications of religion, they may classify themselves as atheists. However, with commodity fetishism even when we recognise that money for instance, is not a real thing or it a product of the human invention we still desire having it. Recognising the false illusions, does not necessarily negate our beliefs in these illusions.

In essence, Marx has shown that commodity fetishism has two aspects, namely, mystification and false consciousness. What I mean by this is that commodity fetishism reveals the ideological false consciousness that humans have, which conceals the exploitation and domination of capitalism. In capitalist society we have the hold on the impression that commodities that we consume, and produce are independent of humans, even when we know of the conditions under which the commodities are produced, we act as if we are not aware of the masks behind capitalism. A recent example of this is the issue of the Democratic Republic of Congo accusing the brand Apple of using illegally exported minerals to manufacture their products, yet the Apple product sales continue to do well even when consumers are aware of these conditions. In an online article Terry Gross (2023) highlights how tech-companies are supplied cobalt by illegal miners who work under harsh condition. “The DRC’s cobalt is being extracted by so-called «artisanal» miners – freelance workers who do extremely dangerous labour for the equivalent of just a few dollars a day” (Gross, 2023). This a typical example of how people regardless of being aware of the ills of capitalism, tend to perceive commodities as things which are inherently full social power and life (Lewin & Morris, 1977, p. 173). The article further claims that besides the slavery-like working conditions, there is also child labour involved. With this information easily accessible to people outside of DRC, these have still not affected the sales of Apple products. Instead, people still desire the latest Apple product.

## *2. Commodity Fetishism and consumerism: The late stages of capitalism*

In the paper “Commodity Fetishism and Repression: Reflections on Marx, Freud and the Psychology of Consumer Capitalism” Michael Billig argues that Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism offers us crucial insights into the late stages of capitalism, i.e., how subjectivity is fashioned in capitalism or how capitalism influences the nature of life (Billig, 1999). Commodity fetishism is closely tied to the notion of ideology, what these two concepts have in common is the idea of misunderstanding the reality or not seeing things for what they are.

Paul Ricoeuer has argued that the notion of commodity fetishism is important for understanding the theory of ideology (Ricoeuer, 1986). Ricoeuer claims in Marx the term ideology, is introduced by means of metaphor, i.e. Camera obscura. This metaphor is meant to express the inverted image of reality, “ideology’s first function is its production of an inverted image” (Ricoeuer, 1986). As discussed earlier, Marx depends on Feuerbach’s argument that religion is an example of an inverted reflection of reality, in Christianity the subject and predicate are reversed (Ricoeuer, 1986). In For Marx and Engels ideology can be understood as the dichotomy between the true nature of social reality and the

distortion of this reality (Billing, 1999). This came with it the task of critiquing this distorted reality and also the task of analysing this reality for Marx. He argues that,

*In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 47)*

In this Marx and Engels assert that beliefs and ideologies are products of the human relations, that is they are socially constructed, and they reflect the conditions of life in which they emerge (Billing, 1999, p. 314). Hence their assertion “life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life” (Marx & Engels, 1970). The critical point here is Marx and Engels were concerned about the construction of truths or reality, and most importantly the distorted versions of the socially constructed truths. Put differently, two things are happening, first it is construction of reality influenced by the material, secondly this reality that is constructed by material conditions, is distorted. As they have argue, “in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura” (Marx & Engels, 1970). In other words, in ideology reality is perceived inversely, it appears as if consciousness is the one that determines man or that God is the one that creates man, rather than man creating God or man. This distortion is a product of power as Marx and Engels argue that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (1970).

Sarah Kofman in the book *Camera Obscura: Of ideology* (1998) explains how Marx was set out to move away from German idealism that he accused young Hegelians of in German Ideology, i.e., they were of the view that ideas are the ones that create reality rather the material conditions that people find themselves and this in a nutshell is what leads to ideology. Kofman following Marx argues,

*the inversion of the inversion involves departing from “real premises”, founded on real bases, the empirically observable “material bases”, and deriving, from these, those phantasmagorias which are ideological formations. The head should not be below but above, and it is not then sky but the earth which should serve as ground: it is men, of flesh and bone, men in their real activity, who should serve as points of*

*departure, not their language or their representations, which are simple reflections and echos.* (Kofman, 1998, p. 2)

It is the material conditions or the physical reality that should influence our reality or rather consciousness. For Marx, if these conditions change, i.e., when we are indeed aware that it is the material conditions that determine our consciousness, we will then be free from ideology. Marx's critique is materialist precisely because of its "insistence that the materiality of praxis precedes the ideality of ideas" (Ricoeur, 1986).

Similar to Marx, the key objective of this paper is to critique ideology. However, unlike Marx whose critique was based on the critique of ideology as a distorted reality, I hold that ideology critique has shifted towards the subject. It is my contention that in the current stage of capitalism, subjects are aware of the distortions and the facades that are embedded in capitalism, yet they act as if they are not aware. To support my claim, I refer to Davis Wallace and Slavoj Zizek briefly in the following paragraphs.

In his essay David Wallace 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', describes irony as a reaction to an unrealistic world. It explains the relationship between how things appear and how they are. Moreover, its goal is to make us aware and expose these facades (Wallace, 1993). The role of irony is to put certain patterns of behavior and beliefs under scrutiny. For example, in questioning my identity, I am at the same time reflecting on my identity. For instance, an ironic attitude towards my identity could be "are you a woman?", in posing that question, I reflect on certain characteristics of a woman, for example, how a woman behaves, am I a good woman etc.

The ironist is someone who calls into question the foundation of things without expressly doing so in words. Put differently, in Marx for instance we have to see through the illusions of capitalism to come out of its ideology, i.e., to see that commodities are not independent of humans, or that the working class is being exploited.

The problem is that such a stance bears the assumption that we can get out of the capitalist system by seeing through its deception or ideology. I think Wallace makes a critical point which I agree with, that is seeing through the system in the way advocated by the ironist is what gets you entrapped in the capitalist system. It is as if the capitalist system asks you to take things lightly rather than seriously, it asks you to see things as appearances and surfaces, that the world is as it were without depth or truth. It is a system that does not believe in the truth or in essence. It is a system immune to critique because it is critical of the truth, of the view that there is a truth out there that awaits discovery. We have here an ideology premised upon the idea that everything is appearances and images, i.e., falsehoods.

Capitalism today, succeeds by being ironic, and we are entrapped in it because it commends us for seeing through its deception, and that is how it sustains its ideology. Wallace makes an example of how Isuzu car ads resulted in good sales through parody. Wallace writes “the ads invite the viewer to congratulate them for being ironic and congratulate themselves for getting the joke” (Wallace, 1993). Capitalistic hegemony is resistant to critique because it has adopted the irreverent, ironic and cynical post-modern attitude.

Zizek also, raises a similar concern about capitalist ideology, he argues that the common understanding of ideology is false consciousness, naivety or a misrecognition of reality (Zizek, 1989). He further posits that today’s world has “cynical subjects who are aware of the ideological mask and social reality, but they nonetheless persist on upon the mask” (Zizek, 1989). Zizek puts it in this manner,

*But all this is already well known: it is the classic concept of ideology as “false consciousness”, misrecognition of the social reality which is part of this reality itself. Our question is: Does this concept of ideology as a naive consciousness still apply to today’s world? Is it still operating today? In the Critique of Cynical Reason, a great bestseller in Germany, Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that ideology’s dominant mode of functioning is cynical, which renders impossible – or, more precisely, vain – the classic critical-ideological procedure. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it”. Cynical reason is no longer naive but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still, one does not renounce it. (Zizek, 1989, p. 25)*

I think the Wallace and Zizek’s claims could not be more relevant and evident than in today’s society. The current society is ridden with culture of consumerism and overconsumption. Today’s subjects are controlled by the constant need of gratification and indulgence, to an extent that often the ethical aspect – such as exploitation of workers and child labour – of this is ignored. I will provide a few examples on this later in the section. In the age of consumerism subjects identity is tied up to their possessions (Billig, 1999). In today’s commodity fetishism, the subjects consume commodities consciously, i.e., they are well aware of their doing. And since it is simply consumption for pleasure, the social relations that lie behind the commodities are forgotten. Commodities are considered as objective by just looking at their value or label. For example, the fast fashion retailer Shein has been accused of child labour, however, it is still operational with customers from all over the world. This shows that what matters is the brand and the price of the product, the conditions behind this product are neglected. We do

not think about the living and the working conditions of the labourers making the product. The clothing items in this instance becomes the objects of fetishism, it also provides a form of identification for its buyers. In other words, the brand represents the means by which the subject “constructs and represents their sense of self” (Billig, 1999).

The over consumption of commodities can be explained as fetishism of commodities. We take these commodities as possessing supernatural powers that can fill up a lack in a subject. Another example is the subjects desire to possess certain material objects which in return define their societal standing. Driving a certain car today, can determine one’s identity, e.g. if one drives the latest Mercedes Benz, we can tell that they are part of the middle class, how much money they make etc. My point here, is how commodities that we possess or consume can become part of defining our identity. I think Freud’s theory of fetishism can better explain the culture of consumerism in society.

*Let me briefly explain fetishism. When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. That is to say, it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and - for reasons familiar to us does not want to give up. (Freud, 1927)*

According to Freud, fetishism entails both the acknowledgment and disavowal of reality, as well as the formation of a substitute for the absent object. In his scenario, the boy acknowledges that the mother does not have a penis, however he refuses to accept this hard reality and would rather continue acting as if the mother has a penis. Likewise, the modern subject has similar attitude. They are aware of the illusions created by capitalism; however, they would rather keep on believing in these illusions. For example, they would rather believe driving a Mercedes Benz signifies that one has a social status of elite, is successful, etc. In reality cars, similar to other commodities are only efficient for their use. The purpose of having a car is for convenience when traveling it has no additional value of defining one’s identity.

*The camera obscura functions like an unconscious which can, or cannot, accept the sight of this or that reality. What is it that ideology refuses to see? Who is refusing? What is missing, in the real, such that it cannot be recognized? (Kofman, 1998, p. 17)*

Kofman poses pertinent questions, which can be summed up as, what is it about reality that we are afraid of facing or come to terms with. Or rather what exactly is it that ideology refuses to acknowledge. I contend that modern subjects are afraid to come to term with the fact that there is no getting out of ideology or



there are no alternatives to ideology. Kofman, critiques Marx's view on ideology as distorted reality by raising two points. Firstly, she argues that "the model of camera obscura sheds no light on the relationship of ideology to desire" (Kofman, 1998). Secondly, Marx "presupposes an original truth which is obscured and inverted in presentation" (Kofman, 1998).

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