Commodity futures
Labour, love and value

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The enigma of the commodity

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. Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1.

Brand-name commodities – not cola, but Coca-Cola® – lend Marx’s observation special force. Their vendors market them as singular and incomparable (‘Accept no substitutes!’) in order to enhance their desirability and hence exchangeability – that is, their substitutability for money and, by this token, all other commodities.

Kevin Roberts, worldwide CEO of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, confronts this particular enigma of the commodity in his book, Lovemarks: The future beyond brands, and on his website, www.lovemarks.com. According to Roberts, ‘brands have run out of juice’, and the challenge is to find an idea that will ‘take brands to the next level of evolution’. For Roberts, that idea is lovemarks.

Roberts tells potential clients that anything can be a lovemark. Indeed, he makes his pitch by way of examples that include not only Tide laundry detergent, but also the educational institution known as Cambridge University and the European nation-state of Italy. Lovemarks require, in effect, the reinvention of people, products, services and institutions as ‘super-evolved brands’, all of which possess the following characteristics: ‘lovemarks connect your company, your people, and your brands’; ‘lovemarks inspire loyalty beyond reason’; ‘lovemarks belong to your customers’; ‘lovemarks are the ultimate premium profit generator’.

If lovemarks belong to your customers, but (it goes without saying) your premium profits do not, then is there anything new here that speaks to conditions for the creation and appropriation of value within neo-liberal capitalist globalization? The idea of lovemarks certainly resonates with the proclamation of two business consult-
the nature of branded commodities and the operation of long-distance commodity chains? Can these insights, when coupled with Marxist critiques of fetishism and labour exploitation, underwrite a politics of value that mobilizes the practices of knowing consumers?

Following things: Networks of value

One response to the challenge of studying globalization – understood broadly as accelerated though non-isomorphic movements of capital, people, images and objects (Appadurai 1996) – has taken the form of fieldwork that deploys a variety of tracking strategies and organizes itself around notions of flows, networks, paths and chains (see Marcus 1995). Network methodologies that track commodities in motion – following things in and out of different social contexts, across diverse physical locations – enable the question of value to be addressed from a circulatory perspective, that is, by way of a ‘conjoined analysis of spatially and temporally distinct episodes of production and exchange’ (Eiss and Pedersen 2002: 268), not to mention consumption. The multi-sited ethnographic work of anthropologists who have tracked commodities as diverse as bluefin tuna (Bestor 2001), second-hand clothes (Hansen 2000) and shea nuts/butter (Chalfin 2004) makes it clear not only that circulation subjects commodities to continual revaluation, but also that the agency of consumers figures importantly in this process. Hansen, for example, has demonstrated how shirts and jackets donated to charities in the United States are recommodified in Zambian markets and purchased by consumers who act creatively in terms of locally recognized codes of self-fashioning. Bestor and Chalfin both show how consumers’ images and fantasies of the faraway origins of products – images and fantasies available, of course, for use by marketers – condition the value of these products along with market circumstances of supply and demand and the economic policies of states and inter-state organizations. For example, Chalfin describes how the recent repositioning of African shea butter – long used as an unnamed, low-cost ingredient in mass-produced chocolate – as a luxury cosmetic appeals to cosmopolitan desires for ‘pure’ and ‘natural’ items of unalienated artisanal origin. Value creation thus engages the motivations and capacities of consumers as well as the labour of producers.

These ethnographies suggest the necessity of complicating (though not dismissing) network methodologies that treat a commodity chain as ‘a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity’ (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986, quoted in 1994a: 17). A leading proponent of this sort of commodity chain or value chain analysis is the sociologist Gary Gereffi (see, e.g., Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994, Gereffi et al. 2001). Gereffi’s work has concentrated on the control structure of commodity chains, introducing a handy distinction between producer-driven and buyer-driven chains. Buyer-driven chains – which Gereffi suggests are becoming more common in an increasing number of industries – are chains in which ‘controlling firms do not, themselves, own production facilities; rather they coordinate dispersed networks of independent and quasi-independent manufacturers’ (Dicken et al. 2001: 99). It is thus the contract structure of these chains that interests Gereffi, for this structure invests the ability to govern the chain not with the firms producing the commodities, but rather with large retailers, brand-name merchandisers and trading companies. Accordingly, the lead firms in buyer-driven chains focus on product development and marketing while outsourcing production and production-related functions to subcontracted suppliers.

Gereffi has devoted less attention to the conceptualization of value in the input-output structure of commodity chains – that is, the ‘value-added chain of products, services, and resources linked together’ – in the sense that ‘concerns that three firms – European and Asian – dominate the market for African shea nuts: ‘Indeed, the imagery of shea as an alternative to late-capitalist industrialization and depersonalization obscures the fundamental dependency of the shea industry on these very economic forms’ (2004:179).

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1. For a review of the promising work being done on commodity networks in anthropology, geography and sociology, see Foster (forthcoming).

2. Consider that three firms – European and Asian – dominate the market for African shea nuts: ‘Indeed, the imagery of shea as an alternative to late-capitalist industrialization and depersonalization obscures the fundamental dependency of the shea industry on these very economic forms’ (2004:179).

Fig. 2. Rabaul, Papua New Guinea: A familiar ‘touchmark’ on the wall of a building amidst the rubble of 1994 volcanic eruption.

Fig. 3. The main bottling and canning plant for products of The Coca-Cola Company in Lae, Papua New Guinea (PNG).
many Marxist accounts (Castree 1996/97). This narrative as deployed in value-chain analysis – what can be called the narrative of incremental growth – is meant to identify inequalities and, in its development policy versions, to offer recommendations on how firms and/or countries can ‘upgrade’ – that is, gain access to higher-value activities in the chain. For this purpose, then, it is of paramount importance to measure value (or value-added increments) precisely – for example, in terms of profits or prices. In doing so, however, the narrative privileges exchange value over use value or, put differently, objective value (unequal shares of the total appropriated value in the chain) over subjective value (the meaning of commodities to the user/consumer). The continuist narrative refuses to recognize the possibility of bricolage, of putting commodities to uses for which they were not designed (Spivak 1996); it fails to take into account the irreducible heterogeneity of use-value: ‘[Use values] become specific use-values only in specific contexts of use and since those contexts can change so too can use-values themselves’ (Castree 1996/97: 71). The continuist narrative therefore effectively strips the definition of value of its historical and affective charge (Spivak 1996).

The duplicity of value creation

The narrative of incremental growth or value addition obscures an important aspect of value creation characteristic of the buyer-driven chains through which brand-name commodities commonly move. What remains untheorized, in short, is how the creation of value for many consumer products (and services) depends not only upon the extraction of surplus value from the labour of the producer, but also from the meaningful use to which the consumer puts the product. This aspect of value creation is absent from both value chain analysis and classic Marxist analyses that locate the unequivocal and exclusive origin of value in the realm of production (Castree 1996/97). Yet it is openly celebrated by many people actively involved in the marketing and advertising of products to consumers, who talk more and more about the power of consumers and the importance of brands (see Klein 1999). These people – including Kevin Roberts – emphasize the need for their clients to establish profound and deep emotional connections between consumers and brands. Pine and Gilmore, in fact, identify this need as the key to the experience economy: ‘While prior economic offerings – commodities, goods, services – are external to the buyer, experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual or even spiritual level’ (1998: 99).

The details of this commercial discourse bear consideration, for they suggest that the source of value for commodities today lies ultimately in the labour of love. A recent interim report from Cadbury-Schweppes to its shareholders trumpets the slogan: ‘Working together to create brands people LOVE’. The word ‘LOVE’ is displayed as a multi-coloured collage of letters drawn from the labels of Cadbury’s familiar confections. The message seems clear: Cadbury-Schweppes is as much, if not more, in the business of making brands as of making sweets. How, then, are we to understand the place of brands – and, indeed, the place of love – in value chains, and thus revise the continuist narrative of value creation?

Kopytoff (1986) offers some purchase on this question with his assertion that ‘commoditization’ and ‘singularization’ are opposing tendencies in all societies. Singularization denotes the tendency to remove certain objects from the realm of commodity transactions – in effect, to invest these objects with incommensurable values, thereby rendering them non-exchangeable. According to Kopytoff, this tendency is especially manifest in highly commoditized societies, such as those encompassed by capitalist markets, in which it is sometimes said that the only thing that money cannot buy is love.

Kopytoff recognizes that his dual classification produces ‘paradoxes of value’ in which certain objects valued for their priceless ness – such as a Picasso painting – are nonetheless periodically priced when they come up for auction. That is, what Kopytoff calls ‘two different systems of value’ (1986: 80) converge in a single object. This paradox, a variant of the enigma with which I began, is central to the creation of value in buyer-driven commodity chains, for these chains create value by transforming commodities into singular objects – branded objects – that nonetheless circulate as objects of exchange or commodities. Manifestly objects with a price, and hence an exchange value, these objects nonetheless accrue the significance of singularity, if not uniqueness. This is how branding ideally functions.

The value of a branded object is therefore derived from two sources. On the one hand, there is the labour of the producers. Looked at from this angle, buyer-driven commodity chains often present cases of extreme commoditization. The labour of some of the producers in the chain – assembly workers in garment sweatshops, for example – is, above all, generic (unskilled) and cheap. Various tactics are used to ensure that this labour stays generic and cheap, ranging from physical coercion of the workers themselves to threats to relocate plants to countries with an even
cheaper and more docile labour force. Indeed, the very location of these plants, as well as their working conditions, is often shrouded in secrecy: here truly is Marx’s hidden abode of production. From a complementary Maussian point of view, the operation of this segment of the value chain accomplishes the almost complete detachment of the producer’s person-ality from his – or more likely, her – product. This is one point in the commodity chain where value creation – surplus value extracted from wage labour – takes place.

The second source of value creation involves the reattachment of the alienated product to another person-al-ity, that is, to the consumer. It is this reattachment that is achieved through branding. I hasten to add that branding involves more than the labour of the special workers who design logos and devise advertising campaigns (advertising which is better compensated and less generic – more skilled – than that of assembly workers). Branding also involves the work of consumers, whose meaningful use of the purchased products invests these products with the consumer’s identity. Such meaningful use is integral to successful brands. It is never a guaranteed outcome, of course, but when it happens, the persons of consumers animate branded things as much as vice versa. Put differently, the persons of consumers enhance the value of brands. In effect, consumers transfer control over aspects of their persons to corporate owners of the brand, who defend their brands legally as protected intellectual property (see Coombe 1998 for an incisive discussion of this transfer). This is another point in the commodity chain, then, where value creation by means of extraction from labour – ‘consumption work’ – takes place.

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Knowledge and the politics of value

A value chain which begins at one end with a social relationship of exploitation approaching dehumanization might well hold, at the other end, a relationship imagined as nothing less than love, a deep emotional attachment between a consumer’s singular person-ality and a partic-ular branded commodity. The transformation of the first relationship into the second is central to the process of value creation in many buyer-driven commodity chains that supply goods such as apparel, toys and footwear to developed-world consumers. To describe this transforma-tive process as simply one of adding value via the expert labour of the marketer is inadequate, and not only because such a description erases the active appropriation of the love of the consumer as the intellectual property of the owners of a trademarked, copyrightied brand. The description is also inadequate because it obscures how the process of value creation relies upon what consumers and pro-ducers do and do not know about the social and environmen-tal conditions under which the other lives and works. To put it another way, the narrative of value addition obscures what has been called both the ‘construction of ignorance’ (Cook and Crang 1996) and ‘segmented knowledges’ (Arce 1997). Such conditions of ignorance and segmentation facilitate the investment of brands with meaning by consumers, and the appropriation of such meaning by brand owners.

Gaps in knowledge are of course a feature of ‘imperfect’ markets in general and long-distance trade in particular. Appadurai has speculated that ‘culturally constructed stories and ideologies about commodity flows’ intensify and proliferate ‘when the spatial, cognitive, or institutional dis-tances between production, distribution and consumption are great’ (1986: 48). The mythologies that surround Melanesian cargo cults – secret knowledge about the source of goods produced elsewhere (see Lattas 1998) – provide an extreme if familiar anthropological example. Bestor (2001) similarly shows how American tuna fishers, in yielding to ideas about inscrutable Japanese expertise in the realm of sushi, put themselves at a disadvantage in negotiating a price for their catch. The notion of constructed ignorance or segmented knowledges thus invites us to think about globalized commodity or value chains as networks not only of production and exchange, but also of perspectives – networks of people’s perspectives on other people’s perspectives (see Hannnerz 1992, Foster 2002). Certain disjunctions in these networks of perspectives render the creation of value – and the achievement of love-marks – more possible rather than less.2

Multi-sited ethnographies of commodities in motion are well equipped to demonstrate this possibility. For example, Cook et al.’s (2004) innovative story of a papaya commodity chain demonstrates how UK consumers might be aware of the tropical sources of the exotic fruit they buy, but remain ignorant of the harsh circumstances under


which the product is produced. Jamaican papaya growers might know the metropolitan destinations of their products, but remain ignorant of the circumstances that determine fluctuating market prices or the reasons why their produce is rejected by buyers. In other words, the creation of value hinges on the capacity to shape and exploit the distribution of knowledge among farmers and farm-workers in the hidden abode of production and distant corporate buyers and consumers in the well-lit offices and aisles of supermarkets.

While disjunction in commodity networks is neither new nor exclusive to capitalism, what might be new here is how thinking about value chains in terms of networks of perspectives encourages a form of labour politics that emerges as a politics of knowledge. The management of knowledge – what different actors connected in spatially extensive networks of production, exchange and consumption know about their place in the network and their connections to other actors – is now a crucial feature of value creation. This much is clear from the activities of so-called ‘anti-globalization’ activists who strive to make visible the conditions of production in which Nike sneakers, Gap blouses and Mattel toys originate. The goal is to overcome a disjunction in perspectives, to connect persons with other persons who all share an interest in some particular commodity or category of commodities. Hence the report in the New Internationalist, a magazine devoted to issues of global social justice, on an attempt to create a bridge between worlds of knowledge with the visit of a Ghanaian cocoa farmer to the UK. The farmer toured various sites along the cocoa trail, including the large chocolate-processing plant, Cadbury World, to learn what happens to the pods he tends (Swift 1998). But it is equally clear that the management of knowledge also matters greatly to certain companies, for whom segmented knowledge can often impede the flow of commodities. Arce (1997) relates the story, for example, of how a group of flower growers from Tanzania were brought by KLM airlines to the Netherlands in order to see at first hand the operation of flower markets, and thus learn the importance of ‘quality’ – that is, learn the perspective of Dutch (developed-world) flower consumers, as mediated by flower retailers.

Arce’s story recalls how the Australian colonial authorities attempted to combat what they saw as the ignorant notions of value informing cargo cults by producing films to show native audiences how a pair of trousers begins in the cotton fields of Queensland and eventually makes its way from field to factory to steamship to trade stores in Papua and New Guinea (see Foster 2002). The success of this strategy was equivocal at best, and it would be likewise dubious to assume that ‘filling gaps in knowledge’ will translate into immediate political action on the part of consumers relieved of their fetishes. (How could it, given the heterogeneity of use-values?) Nevertheless, the politics of value chains entails a politics of knowledge, opening up a variety of possibilities for both corporate actors and their social critics to pursue competing agendas towards ends that are at once economic and moral. The achievements of student activists in joining and forging transnational coalitions with trade unions and religious organizations in order to publicize and protest against sweatshop labour in the garment industry is one compelling example of this politics (see Hartwick 2000 for further examples).

I conclude, then, by stressing that while network methodologies promise, when applied to commodity chains, is not only a way of thinking about value creation that complicates and enriches the narrative of incremental value addition. These methodologies also promise a progressive and ethical kind of political economic analysis. Dicken et al., for example, have observed that ‘a network methodology expands the horizons on which our actions can be seen to be influential and within which we might be held to some ethical responsibility’ for the ‘claims of distant strangers’ (2001: 106). The goal of this sort of analysis, put in the marketing terms examined here, would be to replace one love relationship with another: that is, to replace the erotic and romantic love of a consumer for a branded object with the love between fellow members of a deterritorialized economic community. This is not amor (romantic/erotic/sexual love) but caritas (charitable/self-sacrificial love), the caritas of producers and consumers, asymmetrically linked in a distanciated value chain, who regard each other as dear beyond price. The political goal here is unapologetically reformist, a redefinition of person/thing relationships evocative of the moving conclusion to The Gift, in which Mauss urges his readers to assume ethical and moral responsibility for the social relations of value creation and to do this precisely by making commodities more like gifts.