CHAPTER 9

3C: Commodifying Communication in Capitalism

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1 Introduction

It is a tendency of informational flows to spill over from whatever network they are circulating in and hence to escape the narrowness of the channel and to open up to a larger milieu.

Tiziana Terranova (2004, 2)

Commodity-form and commodification have played an important, if often overlooked, role in critical studies of capitalist societies. Authors such as Adorno (2001/1991), Debord (1970, ch. 2), Lukács (1971), Sohn-Rethel (1972; 1978), Mattelart (1978), Cleaver (2000/1979), Wallerstein (1983, ch. 1), Mosco (1989; 2009), Huws (2003), Murdock (2000; 2006a), Postone (2003/1993), Dan Schiller (1988; 2007) and Wittel (2013) have focused their attention on this so-called “cell-form of capitalism,” as the commodity has been characterised in Marx’s writing. Commodity-form1 was a key category in Marx’s work. It played a crucial role throughout his whole oeuvre, from his early writings on political economy to his latter conceptualisations that included full development of the role it carries in constitution and reproduction of the capitalist societies (Marx and Engels 1976; 1987; Marx 1993/1858; 1990/1867; see also Murdock 2006a; Barbalet 1983, 90f.). Even in post-modernity, commodification process can be seen as being amongst crucial preconditions for the general preservation of capitalist social relations and continuing expansion of capital. Historically speaking, processes of transforming literally anything into a privatized form of (fictitious) commodity that can be exchanged in the market are thus of critical importance for both the rise and continuing reproduction of capitalism. It is only via the production of commodities for exchange that capitalists can extract surplus value from labour (Huws 2003, 61).

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1 Sohn-Rethel takes a close look at the term “form,” which he defines as being time-bound: “It originates, dies and changes with time” (1978, 17). This supposedly distinguishes Marx and his dialectical thought from all other schools of thinking. For Jameson (2011, 35) the word “form” prevents “thingification” or reification of money, exchange-value etc., that are first and foremost social relations.
The process of commodification often very directly influences the immediate experiences of individuals on the subjective and inter-subjective level, while it also has a strong influence on the wider society and relations within it. Expansion of the commodity-form throughout social spheres always produces an observable transformation of our social reality and by a rule makes possible a further increase in economic inequality. It radically transforms social bonds and values that were not based on the market exchange (Thompson 1991, ch. 4, ch. 5; Harvey 2009, 55–56, 62–64; Wittel 2013, 314) and also necessarily contributes to an enhanced individualization of (and within) society. At the same time, market operates independently and beyond direct control of human beings (Barbalet 1983, 89–92). One of the key points made by Marx (1990/1867, 163–177) in his theory of commodity fetishism was not only that commodities take on a life of their own, beyond the immediate control of human beings, but that they also claim mastery over people. In the capitalist social formation, “the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite,” claims Marx (1990/1867, 175). As summed up by Harvey (2010, 42), “market forces, which none of us individually control, regulate us.”

In this chapter, I aim to contribute to a large body of academic work dealing with commodification and commodity-form by directing focus on the field of communication in the widest sense of this word. Commodity-form and commodification are analysed from a theoretical, conceptual and historical point of view, whilst the main consequences of the global universalisation of the commodity-form for society and social relations are emphasized as well. In the following section of this chapter (Section 2), I first look closely at how the commodity-form was analysed by Marx throughout his oeuvre and how this corresponds to the wider constitution of capitalist society. How different critical authors following Marx analysed these processes helps me to clarify the role commodification plays in the emergence of commodity fetishism and how capitalist production and exchange contribute to human individualisation.

In Section 3 of the chapter this analysis is further extended by demonstrating there is now an enduring global commodification of everything, including culture, creativity, information, and diverging types of communication; these social categories are becoming fundamental in what could also be called capitalist informational societies. I identify historical dialectical approach as the only possible way of making sense of the on-going contradictory social transformation, which manifests itself simultaneously as continuity of capitalist social relations and discontinuity of the means of production. In this part the analysis is carried out by using different methods of historicizing. Firstly, through the Braudelian longue durée approach (Braudel 1980), which is used to analyse the long-term changes in communication, information, and culture, as