

THEORY

COMMODITY FETISHISM

Money, debt, property rights, and markets are not unchangeable facts, but symbolic systems based in social relationships. Activists should inspire radical hope by exposing that they can and should be changed.

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Zack Malitz

Zack Malitz, a New Yorker, thinks that fossil fuels belong underground.

“FOR MARX, THE IMPORTANT TRUTHS OF ECONOMICS COULD ALL BE FOUND IN THE GRITTY PROCESS OF PRODUCTION, IN THE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE ACTUALLY WORKED AND LIVED.”

Commodity fetishism is the collective belief that it is natural and inevitable to measure the value of useful things with money. Marx coined the term to mock political economists who believed that carefully studying economic systems would eventually yield a set of natural laws comparable to those found in physics or chemistry.

In a regrettably racist outburst in *Capital*, Marx compared the political economists of his day to “primitive” people who attributed magical powers to ordinary objects — stones, wood carvings, weapons, or, in the case of the economists, physical currency. Their theories, Marx fumed, amounted to little more than a superstitious belief that animal spirits lurked in commodities, and moved markets by magic.

Marx was convinced that most economists barely scratch the surface of economic reality because they were entranced by its elaborate symbolism: money, debt, property rights, prices, and, in our time, ever more complicated methods for computing risk. For Marx, the important truths of economics could all be found in the gritty process of production, in the places where people actually worked and lived. From the roaring machinery of the factory to the rat-infested hovels of the urban proletariat, from the collapse of rural social life to the actual distribution of natural resources, the most important aspects of capitalist society were all traceable back to political domination by a small class of property owners. What really mattered about the economy, in Marx’s view, was that the ruling class could rely on its military and police forces to resolve conflicts over ownership with violence.

Marx’s point remains relevant. By the middle of the twentieth century, orthodox economics had become a heavily quantitative discipline that took pride in its alleged scientific objectivity. At the heart of modern economics is the desire to devise models capable

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of making accurate predictions about economic reality.

Consequently, economists are still dissecting the commodity market and studying it under a microscope to discern its secrets. They tend to be skeptical of collective decision-making and favorably disposed toward markets because they mistakenly attribute agency to money and markets, in effect believing that the market is moved by mysterious forces that, whether they are natural laws or animal spirits, humans simply cannot control.

The challenge for anyone who wants to radically change the world is to dispel the magical aura of the market and the attendant myth of human impotence. Markets don't have power or agency, people do. Think of what happens during a revolutionary general strike. People refuse to work or perform even basic social rituals. The state dissolves overnight and, for a miraculous instant, anything is possible. Banks could be public property, roads could be pedestrian thoroughfares, shopping districts could be spaces for political deliberation, and the government could really be for the people.

Anyone who asserts that there is something inevitable in the historical process has not studied the subject. The beginning of radical hope is the recognition that social relationships are arbitrary and mutable — and need not be mediated through monetary transactions.

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