



Rethinking Cultural Production in the Context of Commodification: Two Step or Dual Production

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Introduction

Capitalism is a production system established on the widening of commodity production. This means that it tries to transform everything possible into commodity forms and capital has an everlasting effort to succeed and render sustainable this transformation. Nowadays, what is happening in cultural production sphere indicates that capital has been expanded in this domain as well. Consequently, there is a widespread industry that mediates culture and posits it as a commodity. In order to understand this industry, it is necessary to comprehend the commodity production processes in it. This brings on an inevitable discussion on whether these cultural products and practices are commodities or not.

In this study, it is discussed whether the cultural products and practices we consume on daily basis, such as music we listen; news, articles and books we read; television dramas and movies we watch, are commodities or not.

The relationship between culture and commodity, shaped by the logic of capitalist production, is explored in the studies focusing on Marx's theoretical and conceptual set. The initial works related to cultural production were produced in the early 20th century by members of the Frankfurt School such as Walter Benjamin ([1936] 2010), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer ([1947] 2002). In addition to these works, between the 1970s and 1990s, the issue was also discussed by British communication theorists such as Nicholas Garnham (1977; 1990), Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1973), as well as by French scholar Bernard Miège (1979; 1989), from the perspective of political economy of communication. Nowadays, the subject is discussed in the recent studies of these theorists (Miège, 2011, Murdock, 2006; 2011, Garnham, 2000; 2011; Wayne, 2003) and in some other works (Louw, 2001; Mosco, 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 2011; Bolin, 2011).

In this discussion, Dallas Smythe's thesis is important from several perspectives. Smythe (1977), a Canadian communication theorist who had a background of economist, broke the ground in the field with his influential thesis of "audience commodity". The thesis has become the main discussion axis related to the subject since its appearance in the late 1970s. It sparked a vivid and important debate between Smythe (1978), Murdock (1978), Bill Livant (1979; 1982), Sut Jhally (1982) and Eileen R. Meehan (1984). Smythe's audience commodity thesis continues to be the case today. Contemporary studies on the commodification processes in communication regularly make reference to Smythe's

work, as is the case in the works of Christian Fuchs (2012; 2013; 2015), Fernando Bermejo (2009), William H. J. Hebblewhite (2012), Brice Nixon (2014), Brett Caraway (2011), Micky Lee (2011), Philip M Napoli (2003), Robert Prey (2012), Earn Fisher (2012), Jernej A. Prodnik (2012).

It must be stressed that new technologies of communication have played an important role in the revival of the commodification discussion in the field given that activities of users in the Internet or in social networks are subjected to commodification. Together with this, new concepts are emerging such as *prosumption* or *prosumer*.

In this study, the commodification processes in communication will be investigated from a different perspective in order to contribute to the literature.

Commodity in Marx's Theory

There is a valid reason to have this discussion in commodity framework. Above all, commodity is the mean of production of the "surplus value", which is the anchor of the capitalist production system. Briefly, it can be said that accumulation in capitalist societies occurs with the transfer of a piece of this surplus value, which is acquired by means of commodity production and exchange, into production once again. Thus, it is extremely important for capitalism the commodity form of anything. In this framework, it is also essential whether cultural products and practices are commodities.

Given the importance of commodity, Marx (1992: 125) starts his analysis in the *Capital* with commodity. Just after mentioning the importance of commodity, Marx stresses the qualities of a commodity. Accordingly, a commodity has simultaneously a use value and a value in exchange. This quality is mentioned as the necessary feature of any single commodity without giving further details. So, it is difficult to understand why commodity has to have these values. However, in subsequent chapters, rendering various concepts comprehensible, Marx offers a comprehensive analysis of capitalist production process. Thus, it becomes clear why and how a commodity has this quality.

It must be noticed that Marx takes firstly a result of the capitalist production in the beginning of his analysis. In other words, commodity is the starting point in Marx's analysis but is not more than a result in the general framework. Behind this stress on commodity, whole capitalist production system is standing. It can be said that Marx starts first and foremost from a result, which is commodity, and analysis comprehensively the mode of production which creates it. This is the reason why commodity can only be understood in the framework of capitalist mode of production and by considering the wholeness of this production.

In communication field, while discussing the commodity form of cultural products and practices, there is a general tendency that ignores this matter. In the literature, the wholeness of capitalist production, or the process that shapes "capitalist commodity", is usually ignored. Rather, qualities acquired by things after their commodification is brought into the forefront, and the commodity character of cultural products and practices is analyzed from this perspective. In this kind of analysis, the problem is not addressing these qualities. As a matter of fact, these are necessary qualities of any single commodity has to have. The main problem is paying no attention to the fact why and how a commodity has gained these qualities in the capitalist production process. As a result of this, cultural products and practices, at the first glance, seems to be commodities to researchers but why and how they are transformed into commodities stay in obscurity. Therefore, it can lead us to wrong conclusions.

Given that commodity has more dimensions than it seems to have at the first glance, these kinds of conceptualizations must be addressed carefully. Hence, Marx (1992: 163) states that though commodity appears something that is easily comprehensible, a detailed analysis shows that it is more complex than it appears.

In the light of Marx's analysis, we know that not all but some things can gain commodity form in capitalist societies. Why it is so? Marx (1992: 273) indicates certain necessary conditions to produce a

product as a commodity. It is obvious that things can gain commodity form and have aforementioned qualities when some factors get together in the historical-social process of capitalist production. To determine these factors, we must first look at the whole capitalist production.

Let's take *Capital* of Marx as an example of cultural product. While Marx was writing or producing *Capital*, any capitalist appropriated the value produced by him. As a matter of fact, Marx did not even produce a surplus value. He did not encounter a direct exploitation. His labor was qualitatively different; he was exerting an intellectual labor. Moreover, this intellectual labor was not commodified because it was not bought by a capitalist as a labor-power. At the same time, *Capital* was not the bearer of a surplus value, contrary to any commodity. From this perspective, instead of conceptualizing arbitrarily cultural products and practices in order to put them in commodity form, just like stretching them in "Procrustes bed", it is wiser to analyze them in the context of the peculiarity of their producers and their own "uniqueness".

In this study, following this way, we will explore firstly why and how things acquire commodity forms by paying attention to whole capitalist production. Then, based on this first analysis, we will try to determine whether cultural products and practices gain commodity forms according to their production processes in different production relations. If it is so, we will also try to explain why and how they gain this form.

Basically, it is argued that the idea of cultural products and practices as a commodity must be addressed cautiously. This is not a denial of the fact that they are commodities indeed. This is to say that not all but only some parts of this products and practices transform into commodities in some certain conditions. The reason of this is the production of these products and practices in very different relations of production and the fact that they are not general but special products and practices (Wayne, 2003: 21). Given that it is the main assumption of the study, this matter must be explained in detail.

Commodification of Cultural Products and Practices

Nowadays, cultural products and practices are mostly produced within cultural industry. First of all, we must consider these cultural products and practices produced in this industry through "content" and "medium" as a way of materialization and mediation for the content. In other words, the products and practices require certain type of medium for their production, distribution and consumption. For example, a piece of music can be listened with a radio or mp3 player; a television drama or movie can be watch with television or in a movie theater; news can be read on papers or internet; theatrical works are performed on stage that can be considered as a medium in that point.

Content and medium cannot be separated easily from each other in "essence" and in "form". Content, which can exist in the absence of medium, can only transform into a general consumption object solely when it becomes "objectified" through medium. Similarly, medium can also exist in the absence of content but its transformation into a general consumption object requires content. Briefly, each one transforms the other into a consumption object by means of its existence; content provides internal object whereas medium constitutes external object of the consumption related to cultural products and practices.

The medium that offers a milieu for cultural products and practices is commodity. Diversification and variation that come with the commodification mostly result from the content. It can be said that cultural products and practices have two different dimensions; on the one hand there is content and on the other hand there is the combination of the content with the medium.

When we focus on content, commodity character of the majority of cultural products and practices is questionable. However, despite their differences they all become commodities peculiarly when they are combined with a medium, or a technology, that offers them a milieu. For instance, a piece of music turns into a commodity when it is finished by its composer and recorded afterwards on a CD or DVD. Likewise, a book becomes a commodity when it is send from the writer to the publisher to be published.

Here, we can indicate a “two step production”. In the study, this situation will be conceptualized as “dual production”. The first step is the materialization of the content. In this step, mainly intellectual or “creative” labor is performed. In the second step, there is the combination of the first step product with a technological medium, causing mainly a commodity production. My argument is that cultural products and practices gain their commodity form in the second step, and turn into cultural commodities. I also argue that, in cultural production, the integration of the ideological (content) and the economical (medium) is materialized in this second step.

If we take again the aforementioned example, the writing *Capital* corresponds to the first step. In this phase, the production process contains such a great diversity, to the point that we must have a Procrustean bed to qualify the end product as a commodity. However, the editorial process and the publication of *Capital* correspond to the second step. After this phase, there is no reason not to qualify the book as commodity. Notably, there is the production of use values in the first step and the production of exchange values in the second step.

Conclusion

This character of cultural products and practices underscores the reason why we must cautiously approach to the idea of cultural commodity. But it is important not to have a generalization on the issue. What is at stake here is just a general tendency. On the other hand, we must not consider the two steps of production as wholly separated and independent domains. In other words, it cannot be said that use values are always generated in the first step and their transformation into exchange values always happens in the second step. There can be other kind of transformations.

It is important to emphasize here that capital tries to commodify these products and practices despite of all differences they have.

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