

KARL MARX

# Capital

A Critique of  
Political Economy

Volume One

Introduced by  
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Translated by  
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# Chapter 1: The Commodity

## I. THE TWO FACTORS OF THE COMMODITY: USE-VALUE AND VALUE (SUBSTANCE OF VALUE, MAGNITUDE OF VALUE)

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'<sup>1</sup>; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.

The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it matter here how the thing satisfies man's need, whether directly as a means of subsistence, i.e. an object of consumption, or indirectly as a means of production.

Every useful thing, for example, iron, paper, etc., may be looked at from the two points of view of quality and quantity. Every useful thing is a whole composed of many properties; it can therefore be useful in various ways. The discovery of these ways and hence of the manifold uses of things is the work of history.<sup>3</sup> So also is the invention of socially recognized standards of measurement for the quantities of these useful objects. The diversity of the

1. Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin, 1859, p. 3 [English translation, p. 27].

2. 'Desire implies want; it is the appetite of the mind, and as natural as hunger to the body . . . The greatest number (of things) have their value from supplying the wants of the mind' (Nicholas Barbon, *A Discourse on Coining the New Money Lighter. In Answer to Mr Locke's Considerations etc.*, London, 1696, pp. 2, 3).

3. 'Things have an intrinsic vertue' (this is Barbon's special term for use-value) 'which in all places have the same vertue; as the loadstone to attract iron' (op. cit., p. 6). The magnet's property of attracting iron only became useful once it had led to the discovery of magnetic polarity.

measures for commodities arises in part from the diverse nature of the objects to be measured, and in part from convention.

The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value.<sup>4</sup> But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter: It is therefore the physical body of the commodity itself, for instance iron, corn, a diamond, which is the use-value or useful thing. This property of a commodity is independent of the amount of labour required to appropriate its useful qualities. When examining use-values, we always assume we are dealing with definite quantities, such as dozens of watches, yards of linen, or tons of iron. The use-values of commodities provide the material for a special branch of knowledge, namely the commercial knowledge of commodities.<sup>5</sup> Use-values are only realized [verwirklicht] in use or in consumption. They constitute the material content of wealth, whatever its social form may be. In the form of society to be considered here they are also the material bearers [Träger] of . . . exchange-value.

Exchange-value appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind.<sup>6</sup> This relation changes constantly with time and place. Hence exchange-value appears to be something accidental and purely relative, and consequently an intrinsic value, i.e. an exchange-value that is inseparably connected with the commodity, inherent in it, seems a contradiction in terms.<sup>7</sup> Let us consider the matter more closely.

4. 'The natural worth of anything consists in its fitness to supply the necessities, or serve the conveniences of human life' (John Locke, 'Some Considerations on the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest' (1691), in *Works*, London, 1777, Vol. 2, p. 28). In English writers of the seventeenth century we still often find the word 'worth' used for use-value and 'value' for exchange-value. This is quite in accordance with the spirit of a language that likes to use a Teutonic word for the actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflection.

5. In bourgeois society the legal fiction prevails that each person, as a buyer, has an encyclopedic knowledge of commodities.

6. 'Value consists in the exchange relation between one thing and another, between a given amount of one product and a given amount of another' (Le Trosne, *De l'intérêt social*, in *Physiocrates*, ed. Daire, Paris, 1846, p. 889).

7. 'Nothing can have an intrinsic value' (N. Barbon, op. cit., p. 6); or as Butler says:

'The value of a thing  
Is just as much as it will bring.'\*

\*Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, Part 2, Canto 1, lines 465-6, 'For what is worth in any thing, but so much money as 'twill bring?'

view is the delusion both of the Mercantilists (and people like Ferrier, Ganilh, etc.,<sup>23</sup> who have made a modern rehash of Mercantilism) and their antipodes, the modern bagmen of free trade, such as Bastiat and his associates. The Mercantilists place their main emphasis on the qualitative side of the expression of value, hence on the equivalent form of the commodity, which in its finished form is money. The modern pedlars of free trade, on the other hand, who must get rid of their commodities at any price, stress the quantitative side of the relative form of value. For them, accordingly, there exists neither value, nor magnitude of value, anywhere except in its expression by means of the exchange relation, that is, in the daily list of prices current on the Stock Exchange. The Scotsman Macleod,\* whose function it is to trick out the confused ideas of Lombard Street in the most learned finery, is a successful cross between the superstitious Mercantilists and the enlightened pedlars of free trade.

A close scrutiny of the expression of the value of commodity A contained in the value-relation of A to B has shown that within that relation the natural form of commodity A figures only as the aspect of use-value, while the natural form of B figures only as the form of value, or aspect of value. The internal opposition between use-value and value, hidden within the commodity, is therefore represented on the surface by an external opposition, i.e. by a relation between two commodities such that the one commodity, whose own value is supposed to be expressed, counts directly only as a use-value, whereas the other commodity, in which that value is to be expressed, counts directly only as exchange-value. Hence the simple form of value of a commodity is the simple form of appearance of the opposition between use-value and value which is contained within the commodity.

The product of labour is an object of utility in all states of society; but it is only a historically specific epoch of development which presents the labour expended in the production of a useful

23. F. L. A. Ferrier (*sous inspecteur des douanes*), *Du gouvernement considéré dans ses rapports avec le commerce*, Paris, 1805; and Charles Ganilh, *Des systèmes d'économie politique*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1821.

\*H. D. Macleod (1821-1902), opponent of the classical economists, who, Marx says, 'misinterprets the most elementary economic relations to such an extent that he asserts that money in general arises from its most advanced form, that is means of payment' (Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 143).

commodities it also functioned as an equivalent, either as a single equivalent in isolated exchanges or as a particular equivalent alongside other commodity-equivalents. Gradually it began to serve as universal equivalent in narrower or wider fields. As soon as it had won a monopoly of this position in the expression of value for the world of commodities, it became the money commodity, and only then, when it had already become the money commodity, did form D become distinct from form C, and the general form of value come to be transformed into the money form.

The simple expression of the relative value of a single commodity, such as linen, in a commodity which is already functioning as the money commodity, such as gold, is the price form. The 'price form' of the linen is therefore: 20 yards of linen = 2 ounces of gold, or, if 2 ounces of gold when coined are £2, 20 yards of linen = £2.

The only difficulty in the concept of the money form is that of grasping the universal equivalent form, and hence the general form of value as such, form C. Form C can be reduced by working backwards to form B, the expanded form of value, and its constitutive element is form A: 20 yards of linen = 1 coat or  $x$  commodity A =  $y$  commodity B. The simple commodity form is therefore the germ of the money-form.

#### 4. THE FETISHISM OF THE COMMODITY AND ITS SECRET

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. 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 if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.<sup>27</sup>

The mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determinants of value. For in the first place, however varied the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities, it is a physiological fact that they are functions of the human organism, and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or its form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs. Secondly, with regard to the foundation of the quantitative determination of value, namely the duration of that expenditure or the quantity of labour, this is quite palpably different from its quality. In all situations, the labour-time it costs to produce the means of subsistence must necessarily concern mankind, although not to the same degree at different stages of development.<sup>28</sup> And finally, as soon as men start to work for each other in any way, their labour also assumes a social form.

Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself. The equality of the kinds of human labour takes on a physical form in the equal objectivity of the products of labour as values; the measure of the expenditure of human labour-power by its duration takes on the form of the magnitude of the value of the products of labour; and finally the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of

27. One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still – *pour encourager les autres*.\*

28. Among the ancient Germans the size of a piece of land was measured according to the labour of a day; hence the acre was called *Tagwerk*, *Tagwanne* (*jurnale*, or *terrajurnalis*, or *diornalis*), *Mannwerk*, *Mannskraft*, *Mannsmaad*, *Mannshaut*, etc. See Georg Ludwig von Maurer, *Einleitung zur Geschichte der Mark-, Hof-, usw. Verfassung*, Munich, 1854, p. 129 ff.

\* 'To encourage the others'. A reference to the simultaneous emergence in the 1850s of the Taiping revolt in China and the craze for spiritualism which swept over upper-class German society. The rest of the world was 'standing still' in the period of reaction immediately after the defeat of the 1848 Revolutions.

the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

As the foregoing analysis has already demonstrated, this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them.

Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other. The sum total of the labour of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. In other words, the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To

mains social. But another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence. This part must therefore be divided amongst them. The way this division is made will vary with the particular kind of social organization of production and the corresponding level of social development attained by the producers. We shall assume, but only for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour-time. Labour-time would in that case play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the correct proportion between the different functions of labour and the various needs of the associations. On the other hand, labour-time also serves as a measure of the part taken by each individual in the common labour, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution.

For a society of commodity producers, whose general social relation of production consists in the fact that they treat their products as commodities, hence as values, and in this material [*sachlich*] form bring their individual, private labours into relation with each other as homogeneous human labour, Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly in its bourgeois development, i.e. in Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion. In the ancient Asiatic, Classical-antique, and other such modes of production, the transformation of the product into a commodity, and therefore men's existence as producers of commodities, plays a subordinate role, which however increases in importance as these communities approach nearer and nearer to the stage of their dissolution. Trading nations, properly so called, exist only in the interstices of the ancient world, like the gods of Epicurus in the *intermundia*,\* or Jews in the pores of Polish society. Those ancient social organisms of production are much more simple and transparent than those of bourgeois society.

\* According to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 341-c. 270 B.C.), the gods existed only in the *intermundia*, or spaces between different worlds, and had no influence on the course of human affairs. Very few of the writings of Epicurus have been preserved in the original Greek, and this particular idea survived only by being included in Cicero, *De natura deorum*, Book I, Section 18.

The two inverted phases of the movement which makes up the metamorphosis of a commodity constitute a circuit: commodity-form, stripping off of this form, and return to it. Of course, the commodity itself is here subject to contradictory determinations. At the starting-point it is a non-use-value to its owner; at the end it is a use-value. So too the money appears in the first phase as a solid crystal of value into which the commodity has been transformed, but afterwards it dissolves into the mere equivalent-form of the commodity.

The two metamorphoses which constitute the commodity's circular path are at the same time two inverse partial metamorphoses of two other commodities. One and the same commodity (the linen) opens the series of its own metamorphoses, and completes the metamorphosis of another (the wheat). In its first transformation, the sale, the linen plays these two parts in its own person. But then it goes the way of all flesh, enters the chrysalis state as gold, and thereby simultaneously completes the first metamorphosis of a third commodity. Hence the circuit made by one commodity in the course of its metamorphoses is inextricably entwined with the circuits of other commodities. This whole process constitutes the circulation of commodities.

The circulation of commodities differs from the direct exchange of products not only in form, but in its essence. We have only to consider the course of events. The weaver has undoubtedly exchanged his linen for a Bible, his own commodity for someone else's. But this phenomenon is only true for him. The Bible-pusher, who prefers a warming drink to cold sheets, had no intention of exchanging linen for his Bible; the weaver did not know that wheat had been exchanged for his linen. B's commodity replaces that of A, but A and B do not mutually exchange their commodities. It may in fact happen that A and B buy from each other, but a particular relationship of this kind is by no means the necessary result of the general conditions of the circulation of commodities. We see here, on the one hand, how the exchange of commodities breaks through all the individual and local limitations of the direct exchange of products, and develops the metabolic process of human labour. **On the other hand, there develops a whole network of social connections of natural origin, entirely beyond the control of the human agents.** Only because the farmer has sold his wheat is the weaver able to sell his linen, only because the weaver has sold his linen is our rash and intemperate friend able to



sell his Bible, and only because the latter already has the water of everlasting life is the distiller able to sell his *eau-de-vie*. And so it goes on.

The process of circulation, therefore, unlike the direct exchange of products, does not disappear from view once the use-values have changed places and changed hands. The money does not vanish when it finally drops out of the series of metamorphoses undergone by a commodity. It always leaves behind a precipitate at a point in the arena of circulation vacated by the commodities. In the complete metamorphosis of the linen, for example, linen-money-Bible, the linen first falls out of circulation, and money steps into its place. Then the Bible falls out of circulation, and again money takes its place. When one commodity replaces another, the money commodity always sticks to the hands of some third person.<sup>23</sup> Circulation sweats money from every pore.

Nothing could be more foolish than the dogma that because every sale is a purchase, and every purchase a sale, the circulation of commodities necessarily implies an equilibrium between sales and purchases. If this means that the number of actual sales accomplished is equal to the number of purchases, it is a flat tautology. But its real intention is to show that every seller brings his own buyer to market with him. Sale and purchase are one identical act, considered as the alternating relation between two persons who are in polar opposition to each other, the commodity-owner and the money-owner. They constitute two acts, of polar and opposite character, considered as the transactions of one and the same person. Hence the identity of sale and purchase implies that the commodity is useless if, when it is thrown into the alchemist's retort of circulation, it does not come out again as money; if, in other words, it cannot be sold by its owner, and therefore bought by the owner of the money. This identity further implies that the process, if it reaches fruition, constitutes a point of rest, an interval, long or short, in the life of the commodity. Since the first metamorphosis of a commodity is at once a sale and a purchase, this partial process is at the same time an independent process in itself. The buyer has the commodity, the seller has the money, i.e. a commodity which remains in a form capable of circulating, whether it reappears on the market at an earlier or later date. No one can sell unless someone else purchases. But no one directly needs to

23. This phenomenon may be self-evident, but it is in most cases overlooked by political economists, especially by the average free-trader.

purchase because he has just sold. Circulation bursts through all the temporal, spatial and personal barriers imposed by the direct exchange of products, and it does this by splitting up the direct identity present in this case between the exchange of one's own product and the acquisition of someone else's into the two antithetical segments of sale and purchase. To say that these mutually independent and antithetical processes form an internal unity is to say also that their internal unity moves forward through external antitheses. These two processes lack internal independence because they complement each other. Hence, if the assertion of their external independence [*äusserliche Verselbständigung*] proceeds to a certain critical point, their unity violently makes itself felt by producing – a crisis. There is an antithesis, immanent in the commodity, between use-value and value, between private labour which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labour, and a particular concrete kind of labour which simultaneously counts as merely abstract universal labour, between the conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things\*; the antithetical phases of the metamorphosis of the commodity are the developed forms of motion of this immanent contradiction. These forms therefore imply the possibility of crises, though no more than the possibility. For the development of this possibility into a reality a whole series of conditions is required, which do not yet even exist from the standpoint of the simple circulation of commodities.<sup>24</sup>

24. See my observations on James Mill in *Zur Kritik etc.*, pp. 74–6 [English translation, pp. 96–8]. There are two points here which are characteristic of the method of the bourgeoisie's economic apologists. The first is the identification of the circulation of commodities with the direct exchange of products, achieved simply by abstracting from their differences. The second is the attempt to explain away the contradictions of the capitalist process of production by dissolving the relations between persons engaged in that process of production into the simple relations arising out of the circulation of commodities. The production and circulation of commodities are however phenomena which are to be found in the most diverse modes of production, even if they vary in extent and importance. If we are only familiar with the abstract categories of circulation, which are common to all of them, we cannot know anything of their *differentia specifica*, and we cannot therefore pronounce judgement on them. In no science other than political economy does there prevail such a combina-

\*'Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Personen'. More succinctly, 'Personification of things and reification of persons'.