

Social Ontology and *Capital*: or, The Fetishism of Commodities and the
(Metaphysical) Secret Thereof
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1. The almost-catch-22

It has been tricky figuring out exactly what to say today. There is a kind of catch-22 in place, in that it's simply not possible to talk about the metaphysics of *Capital* in any kind of advanced way, or even to use the text to think through the philosophical issues that are on display in it, unless the audience already has a command of the material. Of course, it's not really a catch-22, in that these things can be done in sequence. But they can't be done inside of one talk. Thus my goal is to present just enough of the analysis, and also to say just enough about it, that those of you who have never read *Capital* will want to, and that we can have a useful and accessible discussion in either case.

2. The thesis

For present purposes, then, my thesis will be merely that class analysis is really complex, metaphysically, and is therefore more interesting than you might think. It's not the world's most exciting claim, but we'll see what it can deliver. Let me be clear that when I say 'class,' I mean here 'class in the context of capitalism' (since capitalism is not the only form of class society), and that when I say 'class analysis,' I mean here 'Marx's analysis in *Capital*.'

But there are two other claims that I mean to advance indirectly. The first is that *Capital* should be treated as a foundational text for any philosopher who is interested in social metaphysics. The second is that

you can't have Marx's analysis of capitalism without the metaphysics that is built into it. This relationship between social theory and the metaphysics that is required to say what a given thinker has said is not unique to Marx; it's a general point. But it's Marx who's up for discussion today.

3. What is *social* ontology?

Analytic philosophers sometimes think of social ontology, or social metaphysics, as a subfield of metaphysics in which one asks if social things actually exist or not [i.e., exist in their own right, and don't reduce to something else (pick your favorite form of ontological reduction, including appeals to truth-makers)].

Social and political theorists traditionally call the view that they do not exist 'atomism.' John Stuart Mill was an atomist; societies aren't like water molecules, he said. Aristotle wasn't an atomist. Social scientists sometimes call atomism 'methodological individualism.' Although methodological individualism is indeed the appropriate method for an atomist, the correct term for the driving ontological commitment is actually '*ontological* individualism.'

I'm not going to use the term 'social ontology' to refer to debates about whether or not macro-level things exist. On the contrary, I'm going to use it in a way that is more familiar to sociologists, especially classically-minded ones.

When sociology first emerged as a discipline there was a need to defend its existence. Why do we need sociology if we already have psychology? The answer, from Durkheim paradigmatically, was that sociology is the study of what he (Durkheim) called 'social facts' - in contrast to psychology, which is the study of 'psychological facts'.

I'm going to treat the sub-field of metaphysics that is coming to be called 'social ontology' in an analogous manner: social ontology is the study of the being of irreducibly sociological phenomena. You only need to do social ontology if you think that such things exist. If you're an atomist, then it's in the nature of the case that you've already rejected social ontology as a clear-sighted endeavor.

4. Some "social facts"

Here are some basic categories, and distinctions, that a social ontologist is likely to require, in order to talk rigorously about social "things." You don't need any of these if you are not doing social ontology.

- Emergent phenomena ... (here, mostly wholes that are composed of parts but are not exhausted in their being by the being of their parts):
 - Societies
 - Institutions
 - Corporations
 - Collective agents
 - Roles, including relational ones
 - Shared/intersubjective beliefs
- Emergent properties thereof (i.e., the ways that such things are):

Here, properties of wholes; properties that do not reduce ontologically to properties had by the parts of wholes

- Social properties, grounded in social phenomena, but borne by individuals; e.g., that my gender is female; that I am an English speaker.

- Different senses of “downward causation”

(it may or may not be causation, & I don't love the names that I've used, but the phenomena in question do need to be picked out)

- 'constitutive': it is in virtue of patriarchy that gender is a property of individuals
- 'efficient': patriarchy is the cause of women not being promoted at the same rates as men are

5. Now to my thesis, which is that the social ontology of class is extremely interesting. Even compared to white supremacy and patriarchy. It's not that class is more important morally or politically; it's that capitalism is especially peculiar metaphysically.

6. For base-line frame of reference, let's first see what an atomist would say about all three of these phenomena.

Micro-level

- Race = a biological trait &/or an identity (where identity = beliefs that an individual holds about herself, only coincidentally held by others)
- Gender - same
- Class = income/wealth of individual &/or identity or culture (where culture = beliefs or actions coincidentally held or practiced by multiple individuals)

“Macro”-level

- In all three cases, any purported macro-level phenomenon will be thought to be metaphysically exhausted by the being of the associated micro-level phenomena.

Causation

- Since the macro-things don't exist, they can't be causes; this is so regardless of whether or not causation is thought to be productive.

7. Now let's establish a base-line social ontological account of each.

Note: we are considering these phenomena as analytic abstractions only. Concretely, they occur at the same time, and are interconnected.

Micro-level

- Race = a social property, grounded in white supremacy, but borne by embodied, necessarily-social selves, whose bodies have given natural features.
- Gender = similar: social property grounded in patriarchy. But it's a social fact that what kind of material body can bear a given gender identity is less fixed, at present, with respect to gender than with respect to race (male-to-female transgender, but no white-to-black transracial); and a natural fact that the bodily differences go deeper (involve internal organs, e.g.).
- Class = also a social property; in principle can sit atop any material body, though intersects with racism and patriarchy alike. Above all, class at the micro-level is a fact about one's position within a social system of ownership.

Macro-level

All 3 formations are complex, emergent properties of societies, i.e., ways that societies are (where societies are irreducibly relational wholes).

All 3, but especially white supremacy and patriarchy, involve intersubjectively held meanings that are both a function of the formations and constitutive of them.

Thus the social ontologist will say something like the following:

White supremacy = diachronically stable distribution of power and resources within a society on the basis of a temporalized social property of 'race' (i.e., meanings attached by default to skin color and parentage).

Patriarchy = diachronically stable distribution of power and resources within a society on the basis of the social property of 'gender' (meanings attached by default to reproductive organs/DNA).

Capitalism = division of society into owners and non-owners of means of producing and of total surplus;

Might also think of either or both of these groups as a smaller relational entity and/or a collective subject or potential collective subject.

Causation: Here, macro-level entities will not be precluded, in virtue of being thought to reduce to individuals, from being causes.

8. People sometimes think that class is the least interesting of these sociological phenomena. Even people who think sociologically about racism and patriarchy often think atomistically about class. It's just a fact about how much income or wealth individuals have (or other kinds of resources). But in fact capitalism, as a species of class society, is,

if anything, even more complex metaphysically than is white supremacy or patriarchy. Not that there is a competition.

9. How so?

Capitalism (as per the analysis of *Capital*) involves - or, one might think, just *is* - what Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts* called alienated 'species-being.' This means that in addition thinking about irreducibly sociological phenomena, we have to think about a peculiar distortion of human activity -- and the peculiar, distorted products thereof.

Depending upon the context in which it is being considered, the name that Marx uses for the distorted activity in question is 'value,' 'abstract labor or labor-power' or 'variable capital.' I'll mostly use the terms 'value' or 'abstract labor.'

Economists of Marx's day used the term 'value' to refer to generic productive capacity -- laboring as such, stripped of its particularity. In this usage, 'value' is simply an abstraction. We stripped away the particularity, but only in our minds. In reality, weaving, say, is nothing like welding.

Marx goes a step further. Echoing Aristotle's distinction in the *Politics* between economic production for the purpose of meeting needs and what Aristotle called a "perverted" form of economic production, in which production is for the purpose of profit accumulation, Marx argues that in the latter, perverted form, laboring really *is* generic, in the sense that it all has the same purpose: viz., the recovery of profit.

Even though weaving and welding are concretely different activities, different *qua* expressions of what Aristotle called *techne* - even so, in a system in which the essential purpose of economic production is to produce profit rather than to produce cloth or cars -- in such a

system, these activities are reduced to being generic for *real*, not just in our minds. *Qua* production of potential profit, weaving and welding are activities of the same kind.

Generic laboring that is real, and not simply a mental trick, is what Marx means by 'abstract labor.' If we think of the total productive capacity of a society, at a given level of development, to labor *in this weird generic way*, we get the to the concept of 'value.'

Abstract labor, unlike the material expression of *techne* - which Marx calls labor in its natural form (though all laboring is social) - is simply a quantity of commodified efficacy that has, as its purpose, the return of profit to the person who has purchased it.

I will come back to abstract labor is a minute, but let's note that it's not just the activity that's a distortion; it's the products too.

Just as there is a difference between the material expression of *techne* and real-but-functionally-generic laboring, there is a difference between an artifact the purpose of which is related to its natural properties (which Marx understands in a straight-forwardly Aristotelian manner, by the way) and an artifact that is simply an "objectified" quantity of value (and here the thinking is more Hegelian than Aristotelian).

Marx calls the former a 'use-value', the latter an 'exchange-value'.

In non-capitalist societies, even non-capitalist *class* societies, people engage in non-abstract laboring in order to produce use-values, qualitatively determinate objects that satisfy some need or want. In capitalism, abstract labor produces exchange-values, the function of which is to be turned back into money.

"We're not in the business to make cars," Henry Ford said; "we're in the business to make money." Abstract labor produces profit, not artifacts.

I'm going to skip over the demonstration of where the profit comes from - the 'valorization process,' Marx calls it - because that part isn't the part that is most salient metaphysically.

10. Instead I want to look a bit more at value.

Value, remember, is defined as the total productive capacity of a society in which production consists of abstract labor being used to produce profit rather than use-values.

What is metaphysically significant is this. What value so defined actually *is* is nothing other than the capacity had by humans to collectively shape nature according to our needs, and to do so not just intentionally, as many animals do, but in accordance with the laws of beauty (freely; think Kant, though only for a moment) --- value is this capacity when we are alienated from it. Value is alienated species-being. Instead of deciding together what use-values we need, and then making those and stopping when we're done, separate owners of capital purchase labor power from people with nothing else to sell, and then produce exchange-values in accordance with the deterministic imperatives of profit accumulation (you can think Kant again, in terms of the distinction between freedom and necessity, but again only for a moment).

Now, there are - as I hope you can readily see even from the tiny bit of the analysis that I've set out - all sorts of really interesting things to be said just about the *products* of alienated labor - and about all kinds other aspects of capitalism. In fact, there are interesting things

to be said even just about the social properties of use-values, i.e., objectifications of *non*-abstract labor.

11. But I want to focus on alienation.

What does such a phenomenon presuppose, metaphysically? Or, perhaps, what does asserting its reality commit one to, metaphysically?

Three things, I think. First, it commits one to a belief in free will. And it has to be agent-causal free will, too. Why? Because neither an event-causal compatibilist position nor an event-causal libertarian position gets us agents who are in command of their own efficacy, agents who are, literally, self-determining, albeit not omnipotent. This is true by definition, of course, but it is also true more substantially. Alienation refers to (amongst other things) a condition in which one's own presumptively agential powers of determination act back upon one, as though the powerful agent were not really oneself. Agents who lacked agent-causal capacity - agents whose actions were either uncaused or deterministically caused by something other than themselves - couldn't be alienated in Marx's sense.

You might think that agents who believe themselves to lack agent-causal capacity already *are* alienated, and that that's what both determinism and the various event-causal maneuvers around it are tracking, albeit in encoded form. That's what people like Horkheimer and Adorno thought, but in any case the point is that the concept of value presupposes agent-causal free will.

Second, Marx, at least, presumes not just that we have a capacity for creative, collective self-determination (including but not limited to deciding for ourselves which use-values to make), but that this capacity is essential to us. It is, again, part and parcel of our species-being, our 'what-it-is,' to use the Aristotelian locution. (If we wanted

to know why alienation is bad, one answer is that abstract labor is precisely the opposite of *energeia*, of our being fully, the kind of thing that we are.) I should add that although one can believe in emergent sociological phenomena and not think that such entities have a form, a 'what-is-it,' Marx himself doesn't think that way. Different kinds of societies have different forms, as Marx has it. You can think of this in Aristotelian terms too, by way of heuristic comparison with the regime types of the *Politics*. The job of the social scientist and the social ontologist alike is to identify the form of any given human association.

Third, because species-being is connected to creative change-making, to activity in a robust sense - it follows from this that alienation as *Marx* conceives it, anyway, presupposes not just agents who are the substance-causes of change, but a non-Humean, non-passivist account of causation.

12. Conclusion: Really interesting, right?

My thesis was that if you are interested in the metaphysics of social things, there are reasons to be extremely interested in Marx's analysis of capitalism. I hope that I've persuaded you of that. But it's okay if I haven't. I'll be happy if I've just persuaded you to see for yourself.