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Interactive Commodity Loop

Abstract

The commodity is recognized as an essential element of our world. If our relationship with commodity as the structuring form of capitalist society is an ongoing process of subjective work and the exchange of meanings, then the question of historical ontology becomes inevitable. Historical ontology means that “we constitute ourselves at a place and time, using materials that have a distinctive and historically formed organization” (I. Hacking). This paper is an attempt to interpret commodity through the extension of two concepts developed by Ian Hacking (the looping effect, the making up people), and their connection with the philosophical approach to economy. The looping effects of commodity create a special ambience, special forms of connection and separation, equality and hierarchy, community and singularity, freedom and affirmation. The article gives a short historical account of the emergence of the commodity loop (from the 1850s to 2001), and singles out the importance of structural determinations of capitalism (the ideology of free market, property, state mechanisms, a specific type of culture, etc.). The “making up people” inside the commodity loop presumes the people who count, take part in the marketising, imagine the market in every situation, interiorize the market-conforming sense of guilt and responsibility, and, paradoxically, will be ready to be self-entrepreneurs, to participate in own making up. It is shown that contemporary doxa becomes evident from the perspective of the commodity loop, although it creates a context of harmony and reduces complexity. As the analysis goes deeper, we are discovering interactive nodes at steadily increasing levels of intensity but also two possible productive points of resistance (inequality, immigration). The commodity loop is an ontological fabric in which all threads are woven together, from political and economic to social and personal relationships. At the end of the article, we try to connect Agamben’s ideal of profanation with Hacking’s looping effect. This leads to the conclusion that commodity’s phantom-like objectivity should be profaned, which means to return it to free human use.

Keywords

commodity, capitalism, profanation, state, culture, economy, politics

In various descriptions of our world, the commodity and commodification of products, resources, functions and chances are recognised as its essential element. For example, in Jürgen Kocka’s recent *Capitalism: A Short History* one could read:

“... the trend toward comprehensive commodification represents a key component of the capitalist system.” (Kocka 2016, 125)

Similar words can be found everywhere, famously in Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in France in 1967:

“The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity.” (Debord 2006, 21; the totality of commodification is convincingly criticised in Lukács 1971, Anders 1956, Huxley 1959, and Fritz Haug 1986)

However, none of these views goes much farther from the opening chapter of Marx's *Capital* where he "sought to drain the swamp of value and demystify the phantom-like objectivity of commodities" (Worrell 2017, 75). At the beginning of the *Capital*, capital is not talked about, but rather commodity as the specificity of capitalist society, because only in capitalism "commodities" – intended for exchange – are presented as a typical form of wealth:

"The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities, its unit being a single commodity." (Marx 1996, 45)

But it is important to emphasize immediately that Marx begins with commodities to elucidate more convincingly the working of capital. Logically speaking, the general domination of commodities would not be possible without the background activity of capital that contributes or enhances productive work.¹ The commodity as the manifestation of what we call an interactive commodity loop is the basis of our capitalist world. However, the commodity is not static, and it becomes an element of the world only when in motion, in process, in exchange inside the web of specific social relations that create the complex commodity loop. Here we talk about "the most fundamental structuring social form of capitalist society, a form constituted by a historically determinate mode of social practice" (Postone 1993, 44). If there is an ongoing process of commodification of resources, products, functions and chances, then we should think what this process creates as its concrete economic circuits. The question is, what is the proper context burdened with the meaning of gaining a commodity character, that is, how to foster the interpretation based on the intelligibility of modern life mediated by commodities.

If our relationship with commodity as structuring form of capitalist society is a continuous process of subjective work and the exchange of meanings, then the question of historical ontology becomes inevitable, that is, we need approach that, according to the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking, deals with: (1) "truth through which we constitute ourselves as objects of knowledge"; (2) "power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others"; (3) "ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents" (Hacking 2002, 2). He calls these three axes on which we constitute ourselves the axes of knowledge, power and ethics. Historical ontology means that "we constitute ourselves at a place and time, using materials that have a distinctive and historically formed organization" (Hacking 2002, 3). Hacking is also interested in "an understanding of how the forms of discourse become part of the lives of ordinary people, or even how they become institutionalized and made part of the structure of institutions at work" (Hacking 2004: 278). In a Foucauldian approach to distinctive and historically formed discourses, Hacking creates the term *looping effect* (Hacking 1995b; 2004: 297–298; for the relationship between Michel Foucault and Ian Hacking, see Losonczi and Gvozden 2015). For Hacking, the looping effect of classifying human beings is a cycle of changes composed of two basic stages:

- (1) There is an effect on people who are classified. There is a classification K of people, which is made as part of our scientific knowledge. Associated with K are what are conjectured to be laws or regularities about people who are K. At least some people thus classified change their behavior in consequence of being so classified.
- (2) It may be necessary to change the criteria of the knowledge about people who are K, because in virtue of classification, they no longer fit the old

criteria. Or at any rate, one may have to modify the regularities about such people, not because one was wrong in the first place, but because the people have changed somewhat. This, in turn, may affect the people classified, and looping may continue (Hacking 2004, 297–298).

Hacking adds that this is one of the important differences between human and natural sciences. In the latter, objects do not change because they are classified, although we may change them in the light of classifications. Hacking is sure that there is no single underlying structure according to which looping occurs. This means that a specific historical approach is necessary for analysing different notions that make up people, since “a commodity’s social foundations are irreducible” (Worrell 2017, 77).

Participation in the commodity loop is important for everyone, everyone is forced into its movement, and “not the satisfaction of wants, but the valorization of capital is the immediate goal of production; the fulfilment of wants and therefore a comfortable life for the capitalist is merely a byproduct of this process, but not its goal” (Heinrich 2012, 15). How is it possible then that the commodities through the looping effect are hiding this fact? How is it possible that the pursuit of profit is interpreted as a moral weakness (for example, “greed”) or moral strength (social innovation, social entrepreneurship, “greenwashing”, myths about philanthropy), although it is an expression of the structure of capitalism? Of course, it is always necessary to think about the capitalist system, because the commodity loop as such is possible only within the understanding of capital as “a particular sum of value, the goal of which is to be ‘valorized’, which is to say, generate a surplus” (Heinrich 2012, 16). Marx believed that capitalism becomes fully developed only when it becomes a commodity, and where the commodity form demonstrates a totalising impact on economic-cultural reproduction, or, where the commodity loop absorbs economic-cultural reproduction. Only capitalism with certain cultural patterns, biopolitics, organization of life, ideology, allows commodities that tend toward universalization, only capitalism creates the preconditions for extensive and intensive expansion of the commodification and what we call the commodity loop, *i.e.* the looping effect of commodity in Hacking’s sense which we propose as a plausible extension of Marx’s analysis of commodity as the primary manifestation of capitalism. Although it seems that the looping effect of commodity comes to certain borders, because commodification always encounters non-commodified zones (Fine 2002, 31), our thesis is that looping is a process that overcomes and incorporates its limits: for example, the family as a non-capitalist entity (entity that did not emerge in capitalism) transforms itself by being integrated in various ways of reproduction of commodity forms. In Hacking’s phrasing, it may be necessary to change the criteria of the knowledge about people who are family, because in virtue of classification, they no longer fit the old criteria. However, it seems that we lack this kind of re-classification in the light of the working of the commodity loop. That is because the commodity loop is flourishing as part of the struc-

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According to Francesco Boldizzoni, capital “originated as a commodity (or an end in itself) and not as a factor of production, at a time – the early modern period – when the only factors of production, land and labour were not commodities” (Boldizzoni 2008, 1). Later it “began to be identified with the

physical means of production, which, it was thought, would continually multiply, precisely because of their use” (Boldizzoni 2008, 3). Marx is interested in commodity because he understands capital as a ‘thing’ that is hiding its true nature (for example, exploitation as its foundation).

tural determinations of capitalism that still abounds in “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1996, 81).

In the first place among the determinations of capitalism, as it is claimed, is the belief in the free market. Considering the matter from the perspective of the commodity loop, it seems that free-market competition is not so much like capitalism as Marx and Engels thought (Graeber 2015, 143). From this perspective, it is apparent that the so-called global market, in addition to the migration control that still controls the sphere of work in the West, is governed by semi-monopolistic companies, multinational corporations whose struggle is an internal struggle within the same structure. However, thanks to the dominant conception of the free market as an economic equilibrium, we usually believe that the commodity loop behaves according to the principles of market rationality. Since we are classified as people that believe in this kind of rationality, we behave according to the rules of the commodity loop when we are trying to organise our life. But if we think about underlying structures according to which looping occurs, then we will most probably skip the concepts such as allegedly natural and eternal order of free-market and start with historical conditions thanks to which there is a commodity mediation.

The commodity loop creates new forms of culture, characterized by the ever-increasing complexity of experience. Indeed, not only commodities are produced, but also subjectivity and intersubjective context are produced through them, and commodity loop could be the name for the immersion of economies into social relations. The looping creates a special ambience, special forms of connection and separation, equality and hierarchy, community and singularity, freedom and affirmation (Milatović 1992, 100). As products that become commodities in the profit-oriented process of production, objects in the commodity loop appear to be self-contained, whereby they fall into the centre of social events and become their fundamental characteristics. The looping effect is going on: the dissociation of objects means that they lose their social determination and create their meaning, but then we attach certain social meaning to them, which they again attempt to dissociate from us. But again, this implies that we should start not from the pre-given natural agency of markets, but from the analysis of the historical conditions from which this agency emerges.

It is well known that rationality of industrial capitalism is a structural feature of modernity and that transformation of a natural and human substance into commodity happened in the 19th century. Early symptoms of consumerism’s intensification emerged before 1850 and were fully developed until the 1920s (Stearns 2006, 48). As Lukács noted, this kind of universality “becomes historically possible because this process of abstraction [of the human labour] has been completed” (Lukács 1971, 87). In the second half of the 19th century, especially in Paris and London, people started to devote an increasing amount of time to enjoy images of commodities, including window-shopping. Commodities began to create monumental environments in which shopping becomes a pleasant activity. Then emerges a possibility that buying is a leisure activity: in commodity something is now fascinating, a new perspective develops, something that can be called a ‘commodity loop’, a perspective in which the wealth of bourgeois society appears as an enormous collection of commodities, so that even “the poor man is looking at the window with the eyes of an abstract possible buyer” (Fritz Haug 1976, 46). Of course, this change required a special space and new “kinds” of people with an embedded concept of consumption as an extraordinary sensual experience. At the

same time, there also appeared transgressive “kinds” of persons, new types of “diseases”: a department store “creates” kleptomaniacs, and the growing possibility of travelling “mad travellers” (Stearns 2006, 62; Hacking 1998).

In the first decades of the 20th century, the language of commodities became extremely figurative, it melted poetry and banality, there were constant displacements at work, as noted by Aldous Huxley already in the 1950s:

“We no longer buy oranges, we buy vitality. We do not buy just an auto, we buy prestige.” (Huxley 1959, 77)

We buy health or a projection of health sprinkled with imaginations mediated by the commodity loop. The commodity loop needed a specific culture to increase and totalize the character of the commodity sphere. It can be argued that the society immersed in the looping effects of commodity is the result of a strong bond of the economic and cultural sphere. As Henri Lefebvre remarks, the consumer has become the center of “culture”, i.e. the mixture of ideology, performance and knowledge. If a vast cultural industry provides specific products that the user has the “right” to choose, then the products just stop to look like commodities, but as items that now value themselves (Lefebvre 1988, 557). The commodity should have been included in the cultural system and assigned an aesthetic function – this is well illustrated by the example of Emma Bovary, a villager who compensates for the loss of love adventure by purchasing aestheticized commodities. Following Marx’s idea that commodity has an extrasensory appearance, Wolfgang Fritz Haug has convincingly demonstrated that the commodity aesthetics is separated from the object itself and that a complex combination of material traits, cultural processes and consumer psychology is at work in the looping effect of commodity. Following Fritz Haug’s reading, James Dunn emphasizes that a special encounter is at work here:

“As a series of encounters, consumption is not a discrete act(s) of shopping, purchase, and so forth, but rather a continuous, ongoing process of subjective work based upon an exchange of meanings between consumers and commodities: commodities promise identity and recognition in return for consumers’ psychic (and monetary) investment.” (Dunn 2008, 85–86)

At the turn of the 20th century, commodities no longer appeared in rudimentary form but were beginning to offer “an ever shinier and shallower skin, which promises more and more while giving less and less” (Alff 1971, 23; quoted in Fritz Haug 1986, 35). But early symptoms had to transform to real presence for the majority of the population: that happened in the West after WWII. In the 1960s, the commodity loop was already so strong and flexible to include different types of compensation for problems in other spheres of life (Stearns 2006, 61). Capitalism in the 19th century legitimizes the exploitation and division of labour on the basis of formal equality (and real inequality that is constitutive for the commodity loop) and egoistic competition (‘utility maximizer’), but contemporary capitalism requires new forms of ideological justification founded on bureaucratization and socialization of economic life (Woodley 2010, 15). The final stage of development of the commodity loop could be seen in a recent historical event. As noted by Peter Stearns in his book on the history of consumerism, in much of modern history, in times of catastrophe, such as war or natural disaster, people are required to sacrifice some of their consumer delights for a higher good; but on September 11, 2001, people were encouraged to keep their consumer habits (Stearns 2006, vii). The coercion to work is not the only coercion in the commodity loop, it is now complemented by the compulsion for consumption that is impossible

to escape even in the state of emergency (in this sense Klein 2007 writes about the shock doctrine of the so-called disaster capitalism).

Hacking himself has not been writing directly about this kind of loop, but these words are worth mentioning:

“More recently, ‘shop till you drop’ is not a bad joke but sound sociology.” (Hacking 1995a, 29)

Thus it seems that the concept of the commodity loop has the potential to grasp the contemporary situation, since it becomes the primary source of socialisation, of making of society and individual through intersubjective norms. In the world dominated by the exchange of commodities, we relate to ourselves as the embodiments of an abstract and universal activity of the commodity loop. In this sense, the concept of the commodity loop bears some resemblance to Karl Polanyi’s commodity fiction, albeit it is a more material type of activity:

“The commodity fiction, therefore, supplies a vital organizing principle in regard to the whole of society affecting almost all its institutions in the most varied way, namely, the principle according to which no arrangement or behavior should be allowed to exist that might prevent the actual functioning of the market mechanism on the lines of the commodity fiction.” (Polanyi 2001, 76)

Of course, Polanyi understands commodity empirically defined as an item produced for sale on the market. In this sense, labour, land, and money are not commodities, since none of them has been produced for sale, but it is necessary to have a commodity fiction for them to become commodities. From our perspective, this is just another important moment in the emergence of what we call the commodity loop, because this step finally makes human society a subsidiary of the economic system.

It seems that the commodity loop is an extremely active (probably more than interactive), a diluted and complex form of a loop that creates a classification. As noted above, the commodity loop is marked by the immersion of the economy into social relations. In the second chapter of his *Dialectics of the Concrete* entitled “Economics and Philosophy”, Karel Kosik, through the concept of ‘care’, gives an instructive description of subject’s involvement in this object that we are trying to grasp by the notion of the commodity loop:

“The primary and elementary mode in which economies exists for man is care. (...) To start with, care is not a psychological frame of mind, which would alternate with a different positive one. (...) Therefore, objective relationships manifest themselves to the individual – in his ‘praxis’ rather than in his intuiting – as a world of procuring, of means, ends, projects, obstacles and successes. Care is the pure activity of the social individual in isolation. Reality cannot primarily and immediately manifest itself to this involved subject as a set of objective laws to which he is subjected; on the contrary, it appears as activity and interference, as a world in which only the active involvement of the individual sets in motion and gives sense to.” (Kosik 1976, 37)

Paraphrasing Kosik, we might say that the commodity loop is far from being a set of ideas, it is a certain kind of praxis in its most varied manifestations. The commodity loop is an ontological fabric in which all threads are woven together, from political and economic to social and personal relationships. The loop wants to absorb everything into itself, but with as little responsibility as possible, or without any responsibility at all for its threads or nodes. The logic of the commodity loop is taken from the logic of capital: that is the logic of surplus, quantification, statistics, differences, profitability and, of course, classification. But validation of capital through the commodity loop should not be conceived as socially created, but as “natural”.

On the other hand, the category of the market is determined by the *denaturalized* categorization and classification. For example, the *phenomenon* is strictly opposed to *datum*. The concrete price in the market exists in the chain of the market-mediated data set, but only under the phenomenon of the denaturalized price (Hacking 1983; Schabas 2005, 154). Furthermore, we could recall an important insight of Ian Hacking: by the strengthening of the indeterminism in our concepts of the world and people, the control will always be higher (Hacking 1990, XIII). For example, the “objective knowledge” of statistics is viewed as the repository of deterministic relations: but in point of fact, affirming chance undermines the pattern of determination. This strong divergence between indetermination and the growing need of control fits into the depiction of our subject: the capitalist market is the locus of indeterminism, yet it is conditioned by intensified control, monitoring, re-evaluation, and the coercing of recognising. Market-based indeterminism is in coexistence with comprehensive control: this elucidates, for instance, the paradox of the conditioned choice in the context of the capitalist market. The working of the commodity loop is the effect of the interrelationship of macroeconomic and socio-cultural processes. Certainly, the moment when the commodity loop starts to re-produce itself is at the same time, the moment of its full establishment.

In this sense, a typical example of the activity of the commodity loop is the corporatisation of education in the United States, which was precisely described by anthropologist David Graeber. The looping effect of commodity begins by increasing tuition, as students are expected to participate in investment projects of the administration or in the payment of higher salaries of university officials. Additionally, there are continuously growing demands for a diploma to obtain a job provided by a standard of the middle class. When this continuous indebteding to pay education is added to this looping, it is clear that this is a single web, as Graeber says, or that we roam inside the “darkness” of the commodity loop. But this loop would be unimaginable without the key role of state mechanisms that make a key contribution to the extraction of corporate capital: if somebody does not pay the debt, legal remedies come into effect (seizure of property, part of earnings or collection of deposits) which include additional penalties and interests. In this way, the lives of debtors are bureaucratised, and they have to manage as small businesses in a constant fight not to go into default (Graeber 2015, 24).

Thus “making up people” inside the commodity loop presumes the people who count, take part in marketising, imagine the market in every situation, interiorize the market-conform sense of guilt and responsibility, and, paradoxically, will be ready to be a self-entrepreneur, to participate in their own making up. The mechanism of convergence in the commodity loop is bound up with the regimes of knowledge. The “spontaneous synthesis” is a matter of normalisation, processes of optimisation, making the population productive, monitoring of differences and the interfaces between the normalcy and deviancy. Ian Hacking also strongly emphasises the institutions as they appear in Foucault’s thought: they enumerate, practice surveillance, control, verify, order, fabricate and direct the possibilities, which gives them power. They implement the “sweet despotism of reason”. In the context of institutions, we can narrate the sequences of the mechanism of loop that is to be understood as sweet or soft. And this step is an added help to all of us who want to unlock the bolts of this thinking: therefore, we could employ the vocabulary and terms that express the institutional infrastructure of making up people.

In his short article “Making Up People” (2006) Hacking tells us of the list of ten “engines”, or driving forces, by which making up people sometimes

takes place: 1) counting; 2) quantifying; 3) creating norms; 4) correlating; 5) medicalising; 6) biologising; 7) geneticising; 8) normalising; 9) bureaucratising; 10) reclaiming identities. It is important to note that these engines are before the engines that directly manipulate people. This list seems to suit the “economisation of society” through the looping effects of commodity. The biopoliticised making up people is the set of processes, often scientific classifications for the market in capitalism, producing a normative logic and imposing the incentives: in other words, this is the design of people, implementation of a subjective *modus operandi* for this historical mode of market (of course, not eternal market, the market as invariant but historically mediated one captured by late capitalism). In this light appears the figure of subject who is “governmentalisable”: the “productive subject” in the “classical” period and the “competitive” subject of neoliberalism. That the looping or the “interactive classification” always comprises self-relation leads us to Foucault; the practising of the governmental power includes self-knowledge and self-regulation.

Different forms of regulated and self-regulated economic behaviour within the commodity loop are given legitimacy much more from the state regulation than from the abstract market. One of the basic activities of the corporative-bureaucratic apparatus is to support extremely limited horizons (Graeber 2015, 99), and precisely the limited horizons are the condition of most known classifications. It is evident that the ethos of bureaucracy recently entered education and health so that these areas could be subsumed under the looping effects of commodity. Impersonal bureaucratic structures that, through robust procedures, treat cases equally, relying on the ideas of rationality, justice and freedom, have an important role in the functioning of the commodity loop. However, impersonality has its backside in the simple substitutability of subjects within the loop in the name of their abstract but not factual equality. Thus the role of the state for the activity of the commodity loop is crucial: it allows for the establishment of commodity relations, it conceals its assumptions (labour reproduction, restriction of movement and settlement, monetary politics, investments etc.). By making the conditions for economic relations, the state enables the unobstructed functioning of commodity loop as a kind of community, while ensuring the acquisition of the identity of individuals.

Nothing appeals more to the individual’s identity than property, including the so-called cultural capital: the seductive play of ownership is embedded in the flows of the commodity loop, and small and great capitalists play their roles in it. Most of the theorists of liberalism see freedom as closely related to property and the latter is at the same time a condition and guaranty of freedom. Property is socially recognised and regulated/mediated in use, but it also implies the appropriation of things. Through property, the appropriation and use of things or a group of things enters social relations. If attention is paid only to private property, it is clear that it has the effect of exclusion, that is, it shows exclusivist implications, it actually includes all relevant social moments: a way of understanding the meaning of things, what is meant by wealth, how can it be disposed over things, how power is gained over another man by using certain objects. Finally, precisely because property relates to the issue of power, we are confronted here with intricate relations of inclusion and exclusion. Property distributes roles within a commodity loop because it connects and differentiates individuals, sets the workforce as a commodity on the market and differentiates objects. An important idea in the dominant understanding of the appearance of the commodity loop is related to ownership: a person is free only if he or she owns himself, and human society can therefore only

be a series of relations between individual owners, that is, a series of market relations. Generally speaking, free disposal of property puts all individuals in the same position (Milatović 1992, 56). This creates the impression that the commodity itself is the objective product of the individual. And then it seems that the harmony of society is inscribed in the objects around.

Modern individualism is *conditio sine qua non* of the commodity loop. The commodity loop presupposes human as an autonomous individual capable of choosing his way of life and of differentiating objects. The realisation of desire is connected with recognition, and the time and space of the modern subject are filled with an excess of objects. Nevertheless, even though commodity is multifaceted, it comes to our mind first of all in the form of the object of purchase – not of the production or sale, or, say, destruction, conflict or disappearance. Finally, language has been made to make us talk about consumption, not about spending or wasting. The commodity loop means that the needs are constantly increasing, even the scarcity serves the continuous renewal, the surplus is actually closely related to scarcity. The commodity loop always implies a special politics of disappointment: I suffer, therefore, I was buying – this was the motto of Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, one of the first, albeit fictional “victims” of the commodity loop. The process of separation of desire in the commodity loop leads to the proliferation of desire, not only that all wishes are possible, they also become necessary (Milatović 1992, 65). In this sense, the commodity loop even intervenes in the human body resulting in global obesity (Stearns 2006, 144).

The basic instruments for gaining social recognition and the partaking of individuals in community life as well as for the acquisition of social power (status, prestige, ‘social capital’) are the exchange of commodities on the market, and the desire for appropriation and possession homogenises all other desires. Therefore, by insisting on the analysis of individual decisions, we do not at all affect the structure of capitalism: Nancy Folbre emphasises the importance of the economic constraint structure rather than the freedom of choice (Folbre 1994). The selection of commodities is not a starting point as much as a knot of different lines of commodity loops, and its final phase is the moment of self-commodification – commodity creates conditions under which we think and make our identities (Dunn, 2008: 180; see Anders 1956). However, this process is far from ideal, various shadows are constantly developing over it, because violence is inherent in capitalism. In Paolo Virno’s words:

“The phantasmagoria of abstract possibilities in which the opportunist acts is colored by fear and secretes *cynicism*.” (Virno 1996, 16)

Fear occurs because participation in the commodity loop appears as something contrary to complete downfall, while success within the loop produces cynicism towards those who have allegedly made the wrong decisions. Moreover, as noted by Graeber, today “being ‘realistic’ usually means taking the effects of the systematic threat of violence” (Graeber 2015, 86) seriously. According to Marx’s crucial critical remark, there is an “*imminent destructive potential* of capitalism that is activated time and time again” (Heinrich 2012, 36), and so the anxiety is embedded in the modern discourse of trust, and this fact irrevocably enters into the operation and effectiveness of the commodity loop.

Although we should know that for political imagination, it is necessary to be somewhat protected from direct economic experience (Sennet 2006, 161), we constantly hear that economic imperatives are above the political ones. Indeed, Marcuse has already seen this trend in his *One-Dimensional Man*:

“If the language of politics tends to become that of advertising, thereby bridging the gap between two formerly very different realms of society, then this tendency seems to express the degree to which domination and administration have ceased to be a separate and independent function in the technological society.” (Marcuse 1991, 106–107)

If, according to Senet, the consumer/citizen/politician is “offered political platforms that resemble product platforms” (Sennett 2006, 162), then it is clear that the looping effects of commodity mark the contemporary triumph of the economy over politics. But at the same time the commodity loop creates an illusion of the reality of the public sphere as a domain that is allegedly located outside the economic one, and strives to disembed economy as an expression of the relationship of power, confrontation, violence, competition, and social determination from the public field (Milatović 1992, 59). In this sense, politics become the police of the commodity loop, and discomfort is not the effect of the commodity loop but its important constituent. If we separate the truth from trust, then there remains a mere opinion, the blurring of “subjective images” that can be easily employed and inserted into the circulation of commodity.

Accordingly, contemporary doxa becomes evident from the perspective of the commodity loop, although it creates a context of harmony and reduces complexity. As the analysis goes deeper, we discover interactive nodes at steadily increasing levels of intensity. The commodity loop is unstable, and it needs permanent innovation. The commodity loop is a specific regime of relations, which primarily conditions communication among actors and thus prevents the spontaneous development of society and excludes alternative modes of interaction and exchange. Though it represents itself as the totality, the loop is full of contradictions, which are also sources of tensions. For example, the ontological basis of the temporality of commodity loop involves linear time (progress, homogeneous duration), but it melts with the repeated rhythms of production and circulation. In fact, the entire loop is governed by the quantification of time, and when it comes to the space of the loop, we feel as agents within a wider totality, but the important role of a segmented and also thoroughly quantified market must be noted. But this mechanism is still predicated to certain classes: the space of the commodity loop is not homogenous, even in the West, and certainly not globally, although it plays on the blurring of the inside and outside. Ideally, the commodity loop has no outside, the whole globe is its domain, but in reality, it is full of borders which means that the highly valued mobility for many people is the source of suffering.

Therefore, it seems that a critical theory of society still begins, as Horkheimer emphasised decades ago, “with the idea of the simple exchange of commodities” (Horkheimer 2002: 226). But, how to criticise the commodity loop? Perry Anderson says something pessimistic:

“For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant oppositions – that is, systematic rival outlooks – within the thought-world of the West (...).” (Anderson 2000)

Similarly, German historian of capitalism Jürgen Kocka is quite optimistic:

“Capitalism does not set its own goals from its own resources. It can be useful for different social and political goals. Among these goals, presumably, is the aim of rerouting the economy in the direction of greater renewability and sustainability. But this can only happen *if* enough political pressure, and political decisions to match, are mobilized in favor of such goals. That does not seem to be on the horizon, either in the prosperous societies of the global North or worldwide, at this time. Capitalism lives off its social, cultural, and political embedding, as much as it simultaneously threatens and corrodes these moorings. It can be influenced by politi-

cal means and those of civil society *when and if* these are strong and decisive enough.” (Kocka 2016, 169)

Where are these wider structures, unless they were built through what Juri Lotman in his final book calls “explosion” (Lotman 2009)? Can we search for exemptions to the rules at work inside protean shapes of the commodity loop? For example, one research “illustrates the equation of occupational prestige with self-direction and autonomy more than with money or power” (Sennett 2006, 112). It means that at least in a certain number of cases, localised dissatisfaction is the first step. However, we must bear in mind the following: it is simply not true that somewhere beneath the commodity universe, there is an authentic world that only needs to be revitalised. There is not a single element of modern society that is not touched by the movement of the commodity loop. Thus we should not treat commodities as commodities, but demonstrate the scope of the loopings inside which the purchase of a single commodity means reaffirmation of the whole commodity loop. It is, therefore, necessary to rid oneself of psychology and moralism relying on the alleged externalities, although this is not easy. If the commodity loop covers all domains of life manifestations, if everything is marked by commodity (precarity, uncertainty, etc.), and if the points of responsibility cannot be defined as such, then the resistance must be immanent to the loop itself. Accepting the (sur)reality of the commodity loop should be the source of strength and hope. Therefore, attention should be focused on the productive dimensions of the commodity loop, but only in a multitude of resistance points.

The first of these widely distributed productive resistance points is the all-embracing inequality that “has become the Achilles’ heel of the modern economy” (Sennett 2006, 54). The fact is that increasing inequality contributes to instability, and it is difficult to imagine an economy and society that can continue functioning indefinitely with such extreme divergence between social groups (Piketty 2014, 297). Social injustice and social differences could be repaired only by states, and it is precisely after the latest crisis that the states became over-indebted within the regime of the commodity loop. Although points of inequality are distributed not only globally but also within the countries themselves, as Kocka stresses, it is still missing “the power to make and implement political decisions [which] are not nearly strong enough *at the supranational level*, although this would be necessary in order to tame a finance capitalism that has long been globally active” (Kocka 2016, 153). Still, one must be careful when it comes to one important distinction: the problems in financial capitalism are most probably an expression of the problem in capitalism per se. The cold diagnosis of Jürgen Kocka is reluctant when he says that global capitalism that operates transnationally still does not correspond to any approximately transnational global sovereignty able to oppose the still strong dynamics of capitalism:

“Today an analogous process for civilising capitalism is impeded by the lack of a match between increasingly global capitalism operating across borders and the organisation of political power still largely structured around national states. We are a long way from any transnational global sovereignty that could check capitalism’s persistently vigorous dynamism with countervailing force.” (Kocka 2016, 160–161)

“This mismatch continues to pose an unsolved problem”, says Kocka in the last sentence of his book (Kocka 2016, 161). Seen in this light, it could be said that the modern ascent of the rightist groups is just another example of this mismatch, because it usually admits the rationality of the commodity loop and further blurs the possibilities of transnational sovereignty.

Nevertheless, it is clear that if inequality became regained as a constitutive problem of the contemporary world, the change would be inevitable, and the process of making up people would continue its political looping effect. According to Hacking, in some cases our classifications and the classified emerge hand-in-hand, each egging the other on. The point is that naming has a real effect on people, and changes in people have real effects on subsequent classifications. That is why this naming is dynamic and dialectical, and the idea of inequality should be de-constructed in this way. Another example of productive resistance to the commodity loop is the pressure of immigration. Namely, the refugee is at the same time the product and negation of the commodity loop, thus becoming the expression of post-history: he is the product of the commodity loop because the shiny looping is inviting him, because there is “nothing” outside the loop; he is also its negation, because his excessive, uncontrolled presence destroys the “soul” of the loop itself.

Following Agamben, one could see the commodity loop as a final stage of the history of capitalism:

“Even the pure and simple relinquishment of all historical tasks (reduced to simple functions of internal or international policing) in the name of the triumph of the economy, often today takes on an emphasis in which natural life itself and its well-being seem to appear as humanity’s last historical task – if indeed it makes sense here to speak of a ‘task’.” (Agamben 2004, 76)

If commodity in the commodity loop still abounds in “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1996, 81), then, in Agamben’s words, commodity’s phantom-like objectivity should be profaned, which means returned to free human use. To profane, in Agamben’s reading of Benjamin, means to build a special form of negligence that neglects the duality of society–being, or specially relates to this duality:

“If to profane means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable.” (Agamben 2007, 82)

In this sense, dissatisfaction within the commodity loop stems from our inability to see that it is profanable. The result is devastating: the inability to use the object leads to the transformation of the world into a museum. A commodity loop separates the behaviour from itself and turns it into a pure means and in this way separates us from every sensible goal. According to Agamben, “the profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation” (2007, 92), and that means that we need attempt to reclassify ourselves through the ongoing dispositive of commodity loop in order to start another kind of looping.

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Vladimir Gvozden

Interaktivna robna petlja

Sažetak

Roba je prepoznata kao osnovna sastavnica našeg svijeta. Ako je naš odnos s robom kao strukturirajućim oblikom kapitalističkog društva aktualan proces subjektivna rada i razmjene značenja, onda pitanje povijesne ontologije postaje neizbježno. Povijesna ontologija znači da »konstituiramo sebe u mjestu i vremenu koristeći materijale distinktno i povijesno oblikovane organizacije« (I. Hacking). Ovo je istraživanje pokušaj interpretiranja robe putem ekstenzije dvaju koncepata koje je razvio Ian Hacking (efekt petlje, pravljenje ljudi) i njihovih veza s filozofskim pristupom ekonomiji. Efekt robne petlje stvara poseban ugođaj, posebne oblike povezivanja i razdvajanja, jednakosti i hijerarhije, zajednice i jednosti, slobode i afirmacije. Ovaj rad daje kratak povijesni pregled pojavljivanja robne petlje (od 1850. do 2001.) te izdvaja važnost strukturne određenosti kapitalizma (ideologija slobodnog tržišta, vlasništvo, državni mehanizmi, poseban tip kulture itd.). »Pravljenje ljudi« unutar robne petlje pretpostavlja ljude koji broje, sudjeluju u marketizaciji, domišljaju tržište u svakoj situaciji, pounutruju osjećaj krivnje i odgovornosti pomoću kojih se opravdava tržište i, paradoksalno, budu bili spremni biti samo-poduzetnici, sudjelujući u pravljenju. Pokazuje se da suvremena doksa postaje očigledna iz perspektive robne petlje, premda stvara kontekst harmonije i reducira kompleksnost. Produblivanjem analize otkrivamo interaktivne čvorove pri postojanom rastu stupnja intenzivnosti, ali i dvije, moguće produktivne, točke otpora (nejednakost, imigracija). Robna petlja ontološka je

tkanina u kojoj su sve niti međusobno spletene, od političkih i ekonomskih do socijalnih i osobnih odnosa. Na kraju rada pokušavamo povezati Agambenov ideal profanacije s Hackingovim efektom upetljavanja. To vodi do zaključka da bi fantomska objektivnost robe trebala biti profanirana, što znači da se mora vratiti slobodnoj ljudskoj upotrebi.

Ključne riječi

roba, kapitalizam, profanacija, država, kultura, ekonomija, politika

Vladimir Gvozden

Interaktive Warenschleife

Zusammenfassung

Die Ware wird als Kernbestandteil unserer Welt erkannt. Wenn unser Verhältnis zur Ware als strukturierender Form der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft ein kontinuierlicher Prozess subjektiver Arbeit und des Bedeutungsaustauschs ist, dann wird die Frage der historischen Ontologie unumgänglich. Historische Ontologie bedeutet, dass „wir uns mit Bezugnahme auf Ort und Zeit konstituieren und Materialien benutzen, die eine distinktive und historisch geformte Organisation haben“ (I. Hacking). Dieser Aufsatz ist ein Versuch, Waren durch die Erweiterung zweier von Ian Hacking entwickelter Konzepte [der Looping-Effekt, Leute (zurecht) machen] und deren Verbindung mit dem philosophischen Ansatz zur Wirtschaft zu interpretieren. Die Looping-Effekte der Waren erzeugen ein besonderes Ambiente, besondere Formen der Verbindung und Trennung, Gleichheit und Hierarchie, Gemeinschaft und Singularität, Freiheit und Affirmation. Der Artikel gibt ein kurzes historisches Resümee vom Aufkommen des Waren-Loops (von den 1850ern bis 2001) und legt Nachdruck auf die Wichtigkeit struktureller Bestimmungen des Kapitalismus (Ideologie des freien Marktes, Eigentum, staatliche Mechanismen, spezifische Art der Kultur usw.). Das (Zurecht)machen der Leute innerhalb der Warenschleife setzt Menschen voraus, die zählen, an der Marketisierung teilnehmen, sich den Markt in jeder Situation vorstellen, das marktkonforme Gefühl von Schuld und Verantwortung verinnerlichen und paradoxerweise bereit sind, Selbstunternehmer zu sein, um sich am eigenen (Zurecht)machen zu beteiligen. Es wird gezeigt, dass die zeitgenössische Doxa aus der Perspektive der Warenschleife augenscheinlich wird, obwohl sie einen Kontext der Harmonie schafft und die Komplexität verringert. Mit zunehmender Tiefe der Analyse entdecken wir interaktive Knoten bei stetig steigenden Intensitätsebenen – allerdings auch zwei mögliche produktive Widerstandspunkte (Ungleichheit, Einwanderung). Die Warenschleife ist ein ontologisches Gewebe, in dem alle Fäden miteinander verwoben sind, von politischen und wirtschaftlichen bis hin zu sozialen und persönlichen Beziehungen. Am Ende des Artikels versuchen wir, Agambens Ideal der Profanierung mit Hackings Looping-Effekt in Verbindung zu setzen. Dies führt zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass die phantomähnliche Objektivität der Ware profaniert werden sollte, was zu bedeuten hat, dass sie zum freien menschlichen Gebrauch zurückgeführt werden sollte.

Schlüsselwörter

Ware, Kapitalismus, Profanierung, Staat, Kultur, Wirtschaft, Politik

Vladimir Gvozden

Boucle interactionnelle de produits

Résumé

La marchandise est reconnue comme un élément essentiel de notre monde. Si notre relation avec la marchandise en tant que forme structurante de la société capitaliste est un processus continu de travail subjectif et d'échange de signifiés, alors la question de l'ontologie historique devient inévitable. Ontologie historique signifie que « nous nous constituons à un endroit et à un moment en utilisant des matériaux qui possèdent une organisation distinctive et historiquement formée » (I. Hacking). Cet article tente d'interpréter la marchandise en étendant deux concepts développés par Ian Hacking (l'effet de boucle, façonner les gens) et leur lien avec l'approche philosophique appliquée à l'économie. Les effets de boucle de la marchandise créent une ambiance spéciale, des formes particulières de connexion et de séparation, d'égalité et hiérarchie, de communauté et singularité, de liberté et affirmation. L'article présente un bref historique de

l'émergence de la boucle de la marchandise (des années 1850 à 2001) et souligne l'importance des déterminations structurelles du capitalisme (idéologie du marché libre, propriété, mécanismes étatiques, type de culture spécifique etc.). « Façonner les gens » dans la boucle de la marchandise suppose les gens qui comptent, participent à la commercialisation, imaginent le marché dans chaque situation, intériorisent le sens de la culpabilité et de la responsabilité qui sont conformes au marché et seront, paradoxalement, prêts à être autoentrepreneurs et à participer ainsi au façonnement d'eux-mêmes. Il est démontré que la doxa contemporaine devient évidente du point de vue de la boucle de la marchandise, bien qu'elle crée un contexte d'harmonie et réduit la complexité. Au fur et à mesure que l'analyse s'approfondit, nous découvrons des nœuds interactifs à des niveaux d'intensité en constante augmentation, mais également deux points de résistance possiblement productifs (inégalité, immigration). La boucle de la marchandise représente un tissu ontologique dans lequel tous les liens sont entrelacés, des relations politiques et économiques aux relations sociales et personnelles. Au terme de notre article nous essayons de relier l'idéal de la profanation d'Agamben à l'effet de mise en boucle d'Hacking. Cela nous amène à la conclusion que l'objectivité fantasmagorique de la marchandise devrait être profanée, ce qui signifie qu'elle devrait revenir à une utilisation humaine libre.

Mots-clés

marchandise, capitalisme, profanation, Etat, culture, économie, politique