

Commodity chains and consumption

Lecture topic 13

These are Trevor Barnes' lecture slides, from the 2010-11 academic year. They have been edited for followthethings.com by Ian Cook (last updated May 2011). For the diagram whose arrows appear in the followthethings.com logo, see page 10.

Commodity Fetishism

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. A commodity is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. ... There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

Karl Marx, Capital, Volume 1(1868)

Commodity Fetishism



Commodity Fetishism – the belief that commodities fall from the sky into our shopping basket.

- Commodities appear simple, and give the impression that they consist of only things.
- But commodities are crystallizations of social and material relationships, and which are often invisible to us.
- William Blake: “To see the world in a grain of sand.”
- Karl Marx: “To see capitalism in a papaya.”

Commodity Fetishism



Karl Marx, 1818-83

- When we see a world of things, and mistake social relationships as the relationship between those things, we engage in fetishism.
- The analogy is with earlier times when ideas were given a life of their own, an independent existence. Under capitalism we give commodities a life of their own, an independent existence, and thereby fetishise.

Commodity Fetishism

But what really determines the value of a coat? The coat's price comes from its history, the history of all the people involved in making it and selling it and all the particular relationships they had. And if we buy the coat we, too, form relationships with all these people, and yet we hide those relationships from our own awareness by pretending we live in a world where coats have no history but just fall down from heaven with prices marked inside. "I like this coat" we say. "It's not expensive," as if that were a fact about the coat and not the end of a story about all the people who made it and sold it.

Wallace Shawn, The Fever (1991)



Wallace Shawn

Commodity chains

- Commodity chain analysis allows defetishisation: to see commodities as thoroughly embedded in a set of social and geographical processes; to see commodities as “*all the people who made and sold it.*”
- Commodity chain analysis shows the connections between the final commodity and the social and geographical processes involved in its production.

Commodity chains

“The notion of the commodity chain traces the entire trajectory of a product from its conception and design, through production, retailing and final consumption. Commodity chains are defined as the network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity. Chains constitute sets of interorganizational networks clustered around one commodity or product, linking households, enterprises and states.”

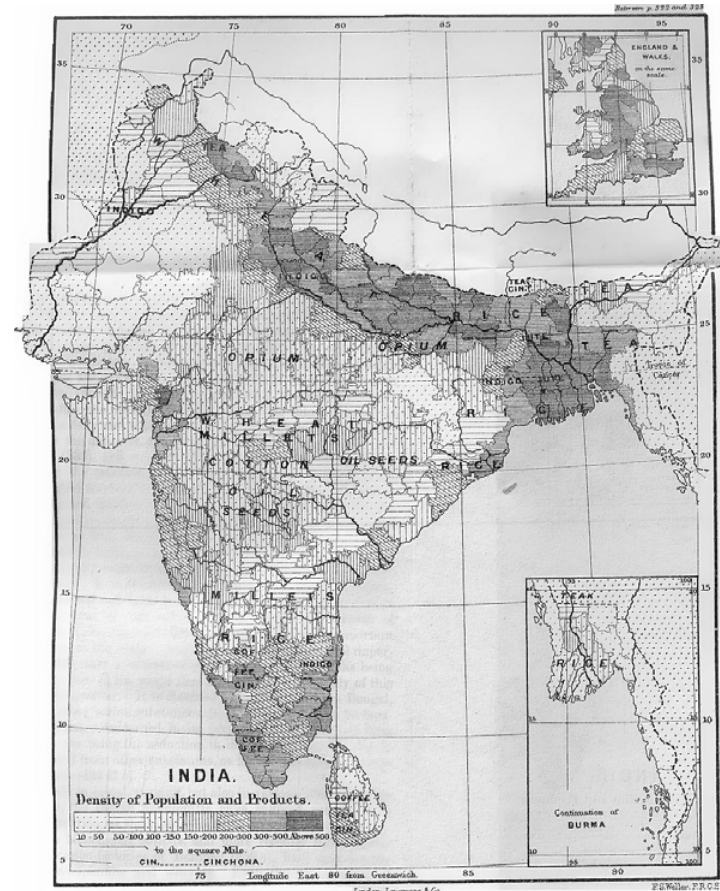
Debby Leslie and Suzy Reimer

1. Chain consists of an interlinked set of separate processes

Conception => Design =>
Production => Retailing
=> Consumption

within each stage sub-
processes

- a) there is a separate geography for each sub-process and stage
- b) different theories explain why a stage is located where it is (spatial divisions of labour)



Map of India from George Chisholm's *Commercial Geography* (1889)

2. Chains, networks and fragility

“Commodity chains are defined as the network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity” (Leslie and Reimer)

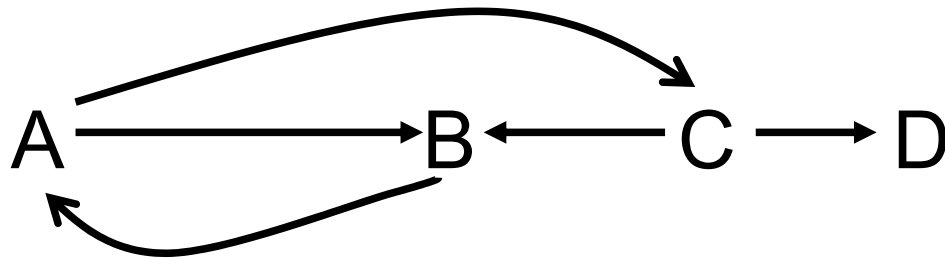
Network = the set of systematic linkages among component elements, the sum total of which allows the successful completion of a defined end.

Chains, networks and fragility

Early work presented commodity chains as a simplified network (supposes a single order and one direction of movement)

$A \Rightarrow B \Rightarrow C \Rightarrow D$ (commodity chain as simplified network)

But networks can be more complex:



Chains, networks and fragility

If think of commodity chains as complicated networks, two implications:

- a) Require heterogeneous elements and relations to produce a homogenous final good
- b) Networks are very fragile, and are as only as strong as their weakest link. Once linkages break, the whole network can collapse (eg, Cook's original Ph.D. thesis)

Maintaining a commodity chain is always a fraught and precarious process. For the papaya:

- Plant disease
- Supervising workers
- Product quality

3. Commodity chains show what it means to defetishise

“Chains constitute sets of interorganizational networks clustered around one commodity or product, linking households, enterprises and states” Leslie and Reimer.

The papaya is not just a papaya but represents a larger world.

a) Slavery, colonialism, the classic international division of labour, underdevelopment.



Slaves working in Jamaica's sugar cane plantations

Commodity chains show what it means to defetishise

c) The North London consumer, their aesthetics, their household arrangements, their class.



Conclusion

Gertrude Stein famously said: “A rose is a rose is a rose.”

But this is wrong: a rose is always more than what it is; a commodity is always more than what it is.