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PART I

Toward an anthropology of things

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: commodities and the politics of value

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This essay has two aims. The first is to preview and set the context for the essays that follow it in this volume. The second is to propose a new perspective on the circulation of commodities in social life. The gist of this perspective can be put in the following way. Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is *politics*, construed broadly. This argument, which is elaborated in the text of this essay, justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives.[1]

Commodities can provisionally be defined as objects of economic value. As to what we ought to mean by economic value, the most useful (though not quite standard) guide is Georg Simmel. In the first chapter of *The Philosophy of Money* (1907; English translation, 1978), Simmel provides a systematic account of how economic value is best defined. Value, for Simmel, is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects. Yet the key to the comprehension of value, according to Simmel, lies in a region where "that subjectivity is only provisional and actually not very essential" (Simmel 1978:73).

In exploring this difficult realm, which is neither wholly subjective nor quite objective, in which value emerges and functions, Simmel suggests that objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, "but we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them" (p. 67). What Simmel calls economic objects, in particular, exist in the space between pure desire and immediate enjoyment, with some distance between them and the person who desires them, which is a distance that can be overcome. This distance is overcome in and through economic exchange, in which the value of objects is determined reciprocally. That is, one's desire for an object is fulfilled by the sacrifice of some other object, which is the focus of the desire of another. Such exchange of sacrifices is what economic life is all about and the economy as a particular social form "consists not only in exchanging *values* but in the *exchange* of values" (p. 80). Economic value, for Simmel, is generated by this sort of exchange of sacrifices.

Several arguments follow this analysis of economic value in Simmel's discussion. The first is that economic value is not just value in general, but a definite sum of value, which results from the commensuration of two intensities of demand. The form this commensuration takes is the exchange of sacrifice and gain. Thus, the economic object does not have an absolute value as a result of the demand for it, but the demand, as the basis of a real or imagined exchange, endows the object with value. It is exchange that sets the parameters of utility and scarcity, rather than the other way round, and exchange that is the source of value: "The difficulty of acquisition, the sacrifice offered in exchange, is the unique constitutive element of value, of which scarcity is only the external manifestation, its objectification in the form of quantity" (p. 100). In a word, exchange is not a by-product of the mutual valuation of objects, but its source.

These terse and brilliant observations set the stage for Simmel's analysis of what he regarded as the most complex instrument for the conduct of economic exchange – money – and its place in modern life. But Simmel's observations can be taken in quite another direction. This alternative direction, which is exemplified by the remainder of this essay, entails exploring the conditions under which economic objects circulate in different *regimes of value* in space and time. Many of the essays in this volume examine specific things (or groups of things) as they circulate in specific cultural and historical milieus. What these essays permit is a series of glimpses of the ways in which desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value in specific social situations.

Contemporary Western common sense, building on various historical traditions in philosophy, law, and natural science, has a strong tendency to oppose "words" and "things." Though this was not always the case even in the West, as Marcel Mauss noted in his famous work *The Gift*, the powerful contemporary tendency is to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words (see also Dumont 1980:229–30). Yet, in many historical societies, things have not been so divorced from the capacity of persons to act and the power of words to communicate (see Chapter 2). That such a view of things had not disappeared even under the conditions of occidental industrial capitalism is one of the intuitions that underlay Marx's famous discussion, in *Capital*, of the "fetishism of commodities."

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism. This methodological fetishism, returning our attention to the things themselves, is in part a corrective to the tendency to excessively sociologize transactions in things, a tendency we owe to Mauss, as Firth has recently noted (1983:89).[2]

Commodities, and things in general, are of independent interest to several kinds of anthropology. They constitute the first principles and the last resort of archeologists. They are the stuff of "material culture," which unites archeologists with several kinds of cultural anthropologists. As valuables, they are at the heart of economic anthropology and, not least, as the medium of gifting, they are at the heart of exchange theory and social anthropology generally. The commodity perspective on things represents a valuable point of entry to the revived, semiotically oriented interest in material culture, recently remarked and exemplified in a special section of *RAIN* (Miller 1983). But commodities are not of fundamental interest only to anthropologists. They also constitute a topic of lively interest to social and economic historians, to art historians, and, lest we forget, to economists, though each discipline might constitute the problem differently. Commodities thus represent a subject on which anthropology may have something to offer to its neighboring disciplines, as well as one about which it has a good deal to learn from them.

The essays in this volume cover much historical, ethnographic, and conceptual ground, but they do not by any means exhaust the relationship of culture to commodities. The contributors are five social anthropologists, an archeologist, and four social historians. No economists or art historians are represented here, though their views are by no means ignored. Several major world areas are not represented (notably China and Latin America), but the spatial coverage is nevertheless fairly wide. Though an interesting range of goods is discussed in these essays, the list of commodities *not* discussed would be quite long, and there is a tilt toward specialized or luxury goods rather than "primary" or "bulk" commodities. Finally, most of the contributors stick to *goods* rather than to *services*, though the latter are obviously important objects of commoditization as well. Though each of these omissions is serious, I shall suggest in the course of this essay that some of them are less important than they might seem.

The remaining five sections of this essay are devoted to the following tasks. The first, on the spirit of commodity, is a critical exercise in definition, whose argument is that commodities, properly understood, are not the monopoly of modern, industrial economies. The next, on paths and diversions, discusses the strategies (both individual and institutional) that make the creation of value a politically mediated process. The subsequent section, on desire and demand, links short- and long-term patterns in commodity circulation to show that consumption is subject to social control and political redefinition. The last substantive section, on the relationship between knowledge and commodities, is concerned with demonstrating that the politics of value is in many contexts a politics of knowledge. The concluding section brings the argument back to politics as the mediating level between exchange and value.

The spirit of the commodity

Few will deny that a commodity is a thoroughly socialized thing. The definitional question is: in what does its sociality consist? The purist answer, routinely attributed to Marx, is that a commodity is a product intended principally for exchange, and that such products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism. Less purist definitions regard commodities as goods intended for exchange, regardless of the form of the exchange. The purist definition forecloses the question prematurely. The looser definitions threaten to equate commodity with gift and many other kinds of thing. In this section, through a critique of the Marxian understanding of the commodity, I shall suggest that commodities are things with a particular type of social potential, that they are distinguishable from "products," "objects," "goods," "artifacts," and other sorts of things – but only in certain respects and from a certain point of view. If my argument holds water, it will follow that it is definitionally useful to regard commodities as existing in a very wide variety of societies (though with a special intensity and salience in modern, capitalist societies), and that there is an unexpected convergence between Marx and Simmel on the topic of commodities.

The most elaborate and thought-provoking discussion of the idea of the commodity appears in Volume I, Part I, of Marx's *Capital*, though the idea was widespread in nineteenth-century discussions of political economy. Marx's own reanalysis of the concept of commodity was a central part of his critique of bourgeois political economy and a fulcrum for the transition from his own earlier thought (see especially Marx 1973) on capitalism to the full-fledged analysis of *Capital*. Today, the conceptual centrality of the idea of commodity has given way to the neoclassical, marginalist conception of "goods," and the word "commodity" is used in neoclassical economics only to refer to a special subclass of primary goods and no longer plays a central analytic role. This is, of course, not the case with Marxian approaches in economics and sociology, or with neo-Ricardian approaches (such as those of Piero Sraffa), where the analysis of the "commodity" still plays a central theoretical role (Sraffa 1961; Seddon 1978).

But in most modern analyses of economy (outside anthropology), the meaning of the term commodity has narrowed to reflect only one part of the heritage of Marx and the early political economists. That is, in most contemporary uses, commodities are special kinds of manufactured goods (or services), which are associated only with capitalist modes of production and are thus to be found only where capitalism has penetrated. Thus even in current debates about proto-industrialization (see, for example, Perlin 1982), the issue is not whether commodities are associated with capitalism, but whether certain organizational and technical forms associated with capitalism are solely of European origin. Commodities are generally seen as typical material representations of the capitalist mode of production, even if they are classified as petty and their capitalist context as incipient.

Yet it is clear that this is to draw on only one strand in Marx's own understanding of the nature of the commodity. The treatment of the commodity in the first hundred or so pages of *Capital* is arguably one of the most difficult, contradictory, and ambiguous parts of Marx's corpus. It begins with an extremely broad definition of commodity ("A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another"). It then moves dialectically through a series of more parsimonious definitions, which permit the gradual elaboration of the basic Marxian approach to use value and exchange value, the problem of equivalence, the circulation and exchange of products, and the significance of money. It is the elaboration of this understanding of the relationship between the commodity form and the money form that allows Marx to make his famous distinction between two forms of circulation of commodities (Commodities-Money-Commodities and Money-Commodities-Money), the latter representing the general formula for capital. In the course of this analytic movement, commodities become intricately tied to *money*, an impersonal market, and exchange value. Even in the simple form of circulation (tied to use value), commodities are related through the commensuration capabilities of money. Today, in general, the link of commodities to postindustrial social, financial, and exchange forms is taken for granted, even by those who in other regards do not take Marx seriously.

Yet in Marx's own writings, there is the basis for a much broader, more cross-culturally and historically useful approach to commodities, whose spirit is attenuated as soon as he becomes embroiled in the details of his analysis of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. By this earlier formulation, in order to produce not mere products but commodities, a man must produce use values for others, social use values (Marx 1971:48). This idea was glossed by Engels in a parenthesis he inserted into Marx's text in the following interesting way: "To become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of an exchange" (Marx 1971:48). Though Engels was content with this elucidation, Marx proceeds to make a very complex (and ambiguous) series of distinctions between products and commodities, but for anthropological purposes, the key passage deserves quotation in full:

> Every product of labour is, in all states of society, a use-value; but it is only at a definite historical epoch in a society's development that such a product becomes a commodity, viz. at the epoch when the labour spent on the production of a useful article becomes expressed as one of the objective qualities of that article, i.e., as its value. It therefore follows that the elementary value-form is also the primitive form under which a product of labour appears historically as a commodity, and that the gradual transformation of such products into commodities, proceeds *pari passu* with the development of the value-form. (Marx 1971:67).

The difficulty of distinguishing the logical aspect of this argument from its historical aspect has been noted by Anne Chapman (1980), whose argument I will return to shortly. In the above passage from *Capital*, the shift from product to commodity is discussed historically. But the resolution is still highly schematic, and it is difficult to specify or test it in any clear way.

The point is that Marx was still imprisoned in two aspects of the mid-nineteenth-century episteme: one could see the economy only in reference to the problematics of production (Baudrillard 1975); the other regarded the movement to commodity production as evolutionary, unidirectional, and historical. As a result commodities either exist or do not exist, and they are *products* of a particular sort. Each of these assumptions requires modification.

Despite these epistemic limitations, in his famous discussion of the fetishism of commodities, Marx does note, as he does elsewhere in *Capital*, that the commodity does not emerge whole-cloth from the product under bourgeois production, but makes its appearance "at an early date in history, though not in the same predominating and characteristic manner as nowadays." (Marx 1971:86). Though it is outside the scope of this essay to explore the difficulties of Marx's own thought on precapitalist, nonstate, nonmonetary economies, we might note that Marx left the door open for the existence of commodities, at least in a primitive form, in many sorts of society.

The definitional strategy I propose is a return to a version of Engels's emendation of Marx's broad definition involving the production of use value *for others*, which converges with Simmel's emphasis on exchange as the source of economic value. Let us start with the idea that a commodity is *any thing intended for exchange*. This gets us away from the exclusive preoccupation with the "product," "production," and the original or dominant intention of the "producer" and permits us to focus on the dynamics of exchange. For comparative purposes, then, the question becomes *not* "What is a commodity?" but rather "What sort of an exchange is commodity exchange?" Here, and as part of the effort to define commodities better, we need to deal with two kinds of exchange that are conventionally contrasted with commodity exchange. The first is barter (sometimes referred to as direct exchange), and the other is the exchange of gifts. Let us start with barter.

Barter as a form of exchange has recently been analyzed by Chapman (1980) in an essay that, among other things, takes issue with Marx's own analysis of the relationship between direct exchange and commodity exchange. Combining aspects of several current definitions of barter (including Chapman's), I would suggest that barter is the exchange of objects for one another *without* reference to money and *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political, or personal transaction costs. The former criterion distinguishes barter from commodity exchange in the strict Marxist sense, and the latter from gift exchange by virtually any definition.

Chapman is right that, insofar as Marx's theory of value is taken seriously, his treatment of barter poses insoluble theoretical and conceptual problems (Chapman 1980:68–70), for Marx postulated that barter took the form of direct exchange of the product (x use value $A = y$ use value B), as well as direct exchange of the commodity (x commodity $A = y$ commodity B). But this Marxist view of barter, whatever problems it may pose for a Marxist theory of the origin of exchange value, has the virtue of fitting well with Chapman's most persuasive claim – that barter, as either a dominant or a subordinate form of exchange, exists in an extremely wide range of societies. Chapman criticizes Marx for inserting the commodity into barter and wishes to keep them quite separate, on the grounds that commodities assume the use of money objects (and thus congealed labor value), and not just money as a unit of account or measure of equivalence. Commodity exchange, for Chapman, occurs only when a money object intervenes in exchange. Since barter, in her model, excludes such intervention, commodity exchange and barter are formally completely distinct, though they may coexist in some societies (Chapman 1980:67–68).

In her critique of Marx, it seems to me, Chapman takes an unduly constricted view of the role of money in the circulation of commodities. Though Marx ran into difficulties in his own analysis of the relationship between barter and commodity exchange, he was right to see, as did Polanyi, that there was a *commonality of spirit* between barter and capitalist commodity exchange, a commonality tied (in this view) to the object-centered, relatively impersonal, asocial nature of each. In the various simple forms of barter, we see an effort to exchange things without the constraints of sociality on the one hand, and the complications of money on the other. Barter in the contemporary world is on the increase: one estimate has it that an estimated $12 billion a year in goods and services is bartered in the United States alone. International barter (Pepsico syrup for Russian vodka; Coca-Cola for Korean toothpicks and Bulgarian forklifts are examples) is also developing into a complex alternative economy. In these latter situations, barter is a response to the growing number of barriers to international trade and finance, and has a specific role to play in the larger economy. Barter, as a form of trade, thus links the exchange of commodities in widely different social, technological, and institutional circumstances. Barter may thus be regarded as a special form of commodity exchange, one in which, for any variety of reasons, money plays either no role or a very indirect role (as a mere unit of account). By this definition of barter, it would be difficult to locate any human society in which commodity exchange is completely irrelevant. Barter appears to be the form of commodity exchange in which the circulation of things is most divorced from social, political, or cultural norms. Yet wherever evidence is available, the determination of what may be bartered, where, when, and by whom, as well as of what drives the demand for the goods of the "other," is a social affair. There is a deep tendency to regard this social regulation as a largely negative matter, so that barter in small-scale societies and in earlier periods is frequently regarded as having been restricted to the relation *between* communities rather than *within* communities. Barter is, in this model, held to be in inverse proportion to sociality, and foreign trade, by extension, is seen to have 'preceded' internal trade (Sahlins 1972). But there are good empirical and methodological reasons to question this view.

The notion that trade in nonmonetized, preindustrial economies is generally regarded as antisocial from the point of view of face-to-face communities and thus was frequently restricted to dealings with strangers has as its close counterpart the view that the spirit of the gift and that of the commodity are deeply opposed. In this view, gift exchange and commodity exchange are fundamentally contrastive and mutually exclusive. Though there have been some important recent attempts to mute the exaggerated contrast between Marx and Mauss (Hart 1982; Tambiah 1984), the tendency to see these two modalities of exchange as fundamentally opposed remains a marked feature of anthropological discourse (Dumont 1980; Hyde 1979; Gregory 1982; Sahlins 1972; Taussig 1980).

The exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity in anthropological writing has many sources. Among them are the tendency to romanticize small-scale societies; to conflate use value (in Marx's sense) with *gemeinchaft* (in Toennies's sense); the tendency to forget that capitalist societies, too, operate according to cultural designs; the proclivity to marginalize and underplay the calculative, impersonal and self-aggrandizing features of noncapitalist societies. These tendencies, in turn, are a product of an oversimplified view of the opposition between Mauss and Marx, which, as Keith Hart (1982) has suggested, misses important aspects of the commonalities between them.

Gifts, and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities. Further, where gifts link things to persons and embed the flow of things in the flow of social relations, commodities are held to represent the drive – largely free of moral or cultural constraints – of goods for one another, a drive mediated by