

# Marx and Mauss Contra Habermas: Reification and Recognition in Production and Exchange

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## Introduction

Since the so-called “communicative turn” in Critical Theory, the Marxian concept of labour has been relegated to almost complete insignificance. Jurgen Habermas, who introduced this paradigm shift, contends that Marx in his work reduced interaction to labour and as a result, communicative action to instrumental action. As he put it: “[l]iberation from hunger and misery does not necessarily converge with liberation from servitude and degradation, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labour and interaction.” (Habermas 1973, p.169) Accordingly, for Habermas, the Marxian concept of labour cannot provide an adequate explanation for the genesis of social norms or their reproduction, neither can it serve as a basis to test the status of their moral validity. So, while labor is instrumental, in other words goal- and success-oriented, language is oriented towards reaching understanding and consensus (Habermas 1984, p.286). On the basis of this distinction, Habermas accords to labour a system-integrative role and to language a social-integrative role.

I propose to address Habermas’s critique by drawing out the implicit intersubjective and cognitive aspects of Marx’s concept of labour, and by showing its affinity with certain facets of Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift. My approach is the following: firstly, I focus on the relationship between Marx’s notions of alienation and commodity fetishism in order to show how his analysis of production and exchange implies

relations of both recognition and misrecognition; secondly, I turn to Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift in my attempt to show that production and exchange have the potential to be oriented towards reaching understanding and consensus, and can thus escape the confines of instrumental reason; finally, I conclude by briefly outlining a research project, which would address the question of whether these insights could be of practical significance to those who seek some form of socialist reorganization of modern, complex and differentiated societies.

### **Marx, Recognition and Reification**

Contemporary discussions of the theory of recognition draw mainly - although not exclusively - on Hegel's exposition of the master and slave dialectic found in the *Phenomenology* (1977). Very briefly, according to Hegel's account, in order for a person to attain full personhood, not only must they be recognised by an equal other as a free and conscious being, but they must, in turn, reciprocate this same recognition to the other person - equality and reciprocity are both fundamental in this account.

Honneth (1996) Brudney (2010) and Quante (2011) among others have drawn attention to a passage from Marx's *Notes on James Mill* which echoes Hegel's notion of recognition. In the *Notes*, Marx provides an account and critique of alienated production and exchange, where human beings use each other only as a means to their individual benefit and act as mediators between objects, instead of objects acting as mediators between them. Marx (1992, pp.277-278), then proceeds to invite the reader to imagine "that we had produced as human beings" and paints a picture of communist production and exchange taking place in accordance with our species-being. [\[1\]](#) According to this account, a double affirmation occurs: 1) Individuals find creative self-expression and self-realization through their work, and 2) Individuals express their mutual care and concern for others and their needs. Central to this account is the

opposition between private property in capitalism and common property in communism, and the subordination, in the latter case, of the goal of production and exchange to human needs. In other words, for Marx, labour, apart from having the potential to act as a vehicle of self-realization for the individual, also serves the function of social integration, where production and exchange are oriented towards reaching understanding. Production and exchange in this instance, serve as a vehicle for the mutual recognition of social actors. This is to be contrasted to the account of alienated production and exchange in the same text where relations appear to be, not between human beings, but between their products, that have as Marx put it, “stood up on [their] hind legs against us” (1992, p.276). This is a very early formulation of what would later come to be known as commodity fetishism, which, as I argue below, can be interpreted as an instance of misrecognition.

Marx’s account of commodity fetishism, on which Lukacs (1971) based his analysis of reification, relates to how in capitalism, relationships between human beings assume the form of relationships between commodities. According to Marx, this type of ‘fetishism’ is the result of the mode of production which is specific to capitalism whereby individuals produce under the dictates and needs of capital, under circumstances that escape their control, and come into contact at the moment of exchange as owners of their respective commodities. Dr Andrew Chitty (1998) has shown that this relationship entails a “factual recognition”, since the individuals exchanging commodities recognise each other as equal persons. This ‘factual recognition’ however, can be understood as an instance of misrecognition, since it is an incomplete and superficial form of recognition. Here, again, human beings act as mediators between objects, instead of objects acting as mediators between human beings. Marx’s solution to commodity fetishism, is an “association of free men, working with the means of production held in common”. [2] In many ways this passage is reminiscent of Marx’s utopia of mutual recognition found in *Notes on James Mill*.

While these themes can be found throughout Marx's work, I have drawn attention only to the above passages very selectively, in order to show the relationship between the phenomena of reification and recognition, and also, to show that there exists a certain continuity between Marx's early and mature thought on these issues. While Honneth (2008) has already reinterpreted the concept of reification from a recognition-theoretical standpoint, he did so in an effort to remove the emphasis from the sphere of the economic.

Having outlined the relationship between reification and recognition in production and exchange, as well as the implications this relationship may have for normativity and social integration, I now wish to call attention to the sociological and anthropological evidence in support of this thesis, by reference to Marcel Mauss's work on the gift. By turning to Mauss, my goal is not to argue that his views on production and exchange are identical to Marx's - the differences between Marx and Mauss after all are vast. What I aim to do, is to show the similarities between Marx's concept of communism and *certain* forms of the gift as analysed by Mauss as well as and their compatibility with the paradigm of recognition. [\[3\]](#)

### **Mauss and the Gift**

In his seminal study of gift exchange in premodern societies, Mauss discovered a paradox: while the gift appears to be free from obligation and constraint, in reality it carries a threefold obligation: (a) the obligation to give a gift, (b) the obligation to accept a gift, and (c) the obligation to reciprocate a gift. Moreover, what Mauss found is that these exchanges of gifts are more than just exchanges of objects. Certain forms of the gift are oriented towards social integration and reaching understanding between the actors exchanging the gifts. As he explained, gifts "are never completely detached from those carrying out the exchange. The mutual ties and alliance that they establish are comparatively indissoluble." (Mauss, 2002, p.42). Ricoeur (2005), Robbins (2009),

Sennett (2004, p.219) among others have shown the parallels between gift exchange as analysed by Mauss, and mutual recognition and respect. Further, Mauss's understanding of the gift, shares with Marx's notion of communist production and exchange the view that persons exchange not only goods but also parts of themselves. For Marx, my product is at the same time the objectification of *my* individuality, *and* the means by which to satisfy *your* needs. Thus, it is clear that economic action has the potential to escape the narrow confines of instrumental reason and to have normative implications. Also of significance in this respect is Mauss's understanding of the gift as a "total social fact".

The phenomenon of the gift according to Mauss is a "total social fact" in the sense that it is "at the same time juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological, etc." [4] The action orientation of gift-giving involves a variety of rationalities and as such, it cannot be reduced to instrumental action alone. It can be said that the normative implications of gift exchange are inherent in the specific way in which it combines different action orientations and rationalities.

Habermas, for his part, is aware of the fact that gift exchange can serve social-integrative functions. In the second volume of the Theory of Communicative action, while citing Mauss, Habermas (1987, p.161) accepts that in societies that display a low level of differentiation, the role of exchange is to "foster sociation, that is, to stabilize friendly relations with the social environment and to incorporate foreign elements into their own system." However, even in such cases, Habermas believes that two distinct rationalities are at play. As he puts it "the mechanism of exchange has so little detached itself from normative contexts that a clear separation between economic and noneconomic values is hardly possible" (Habermas, 1987, p.163). In other words, even though Habermas concedes that exchange can serve society's need for social integration, he still insists on a sharp dichotomy between instrumental and communicative action, each attached respectively to system

integration and to social integration. However, from the analysis of Marx and Mauss above, it is difficult to see how the normative implications of economic action can be denied. Victor Li (2006, p.182), citing James Carrier's (1992) comparative analysis of exchange in premodern and modern societies, argues that Habermas draws an unwarranted sharp distinction between modern and premodern societies in this regard, without realizing that gift exchange persists to this day even in modern, complex, differentiated societies. Indeed, Mauss (2002, pp.83ff) argued that the institution of gift exchange can be found to this day in certain pockets of society, taking the form of mutual aid associations, friendly societies, even that of the welfare state. In other words, the gift, as a "total social fact", shows that economic action can be normative and oriented towards social-integration and reaching understanding, even in market societies that exhibit a high degree of differentiation and complexity.

## **Conclusion**

I hope to have shown successfully not only the similarities between Marx and Mauss, but also the link between reification and recognition. Further, I hope to have demonstrated that production and exchange under certain circumstances can have normative implications and serve social-integrative functions in addition to system-integrative functions. However, several questions follow from the above analysis. What are the implications of the fact that economic action has the potential to be oriented towards reaching understanding when it comes to the question of social reform? For example The Robbers Cave Experiment conducted by Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues shows how competition over resources leads to the creation of exclusionary and discriminatory norms, while the formulation of common goals replaces these norms with cooperation and solidarity. [5] These insights are indispensable but their translation into social policy is a different issue. What kind of institutions can foster forms of association and integration that lead to mutual recognition?

For Mauss, a committed socialist following in the footsteps of his uncle and mentor Emile Durkheim, the most suitable institutions were the professional associations of his time, as he favoured a type of guild or market socialism. In fact, in his critique of the Bolshevik revolution, which was written around the same time as his essay on the gift, he saw the soviets or workers' councils as a live example of this type of institution favoured both by himself and Durkheim (Mauss, 1992). Similarly, Marx's critique of alienation and reification, as well as his concept of communism, implies and occasionally explicates a model of radical democratic participation that found expression in the revolutionary councilist tradition.

However, Habermas's critique of Marx presents a formidable challenge in this respect. Can modern societies, highly complex and differentiated as they are, be organised along these lines? Anyone seeking to answer these questions must engage with the issue of whether the facts of complexity and differentiation mean that certain domains, specifically the economy, are impervious to democratic control. A fruitful way to go about in answering this question would be to attempt a reconstruction of Marx's concept of labour by incorporating Mauss's insights and elaborating the normative potentials of production and exchange.

## Endnotes

[1] The full passage reads:

Let us suppose that we had produced as human beings. In that event each of us would have *doubly affirmed* himself and his neighbour in his production. (1) In my *production* I would have objectified the *specific character* of my *individuality* and for that reason I would both have enjoyed the *expression* of my own individual *life* during my activity and also, in contemplating the object, I would experience an individual pleasure, I would experience my personality as an *objective sensuously perceptible power beyond all shadow of doubt*. (2) In your use or enjoyment of my product I would have the *immediate* satisfaction and knowledge that in my labour I had gratified a *human* need, i.e. that I had objectified *human nature* and hence had procured an object corresponding to the needs of another *human being*. (3) I would have acted for you as the *mediator* between you and the species, thus I would be acknowledged by you as the complement of your own being, as an essential part of yourself. I would thus know myself to be confirmed both in your thoughts and your love. (4) In the individual expression of my own life I would have brought about the immediate expression of your life, and so in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realized* my authentic nature, my *human, communal* nature. (Marx, 1992, pp.277-8)

[2] The passage reads:

Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force.

[...] The total product of our imagined association is a social product. (Marx, 1976, p.171)

[3] It should be noted that Mauss does not attempt a typology of the different forms of the gift even though throughout his essay it is clear that he, at the very least, implicitly differentiates between several types of gift depending on the motivations behind it. It should be borne in mind however that not all forms of the gift would be compatible with the paradigm of recognition - for example the strategic or instrumental gift and the agonistic gift. For different attempts at a typology see: Vandeveldt (2000, pp.7-8) and Godbout (2000, pp.42-3).

[4] As Mauss (2002, p.101) explains:

All these phenomena are at the same time juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological, etc. They are juridical because they concern private and public law, and a morality that is organized and diffused throughout society; they are strictly obligatory or merely an occasion for praise or blame; they are political and domestic at the same time, relating to social classes as well as clans and families. They are religious in the strict sense, concerning magic, animism, and a diffused religious mentality. They are economic. The idea of value, utility, self-interest, luxury, wealth, the acquisition and accumulation of goods—all these on the one hand—and on the other, that of consumption, even that of deliberate spending for its own sake, purely sumptuary: all these phenomena are present everywhere, although we understand them differently today. Moreover, these institutions have an important aesthetic aspect that we have deliberately omitted from this study. Yet the dances that are carried out in turn, the songs and processions of every kind, the dramatic performances that are given from camp to camp, and by one associate to another; the objects of every sort that are made, used, ornamented, polished, collected, and lovingly

passed on, all that is joyfully received and successfully presented, the banquets themselves in which everyone participates; everything, food, objects, and services, even 'respect', as the Tlingit say, is a cause of aesthetic emotion, and not only of emotions of a moral order or relating to self-interest.

[\[5\]](#) For a brief summary of the experiment see Fine (2004).

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