



Commodification of Organs As Objects of Desire

Abstract Building on Marx and Freud, Lacan reflects on how commodities become objects of desire. The commodity becomes a fetish, a replacement of a partial object (the object of desire). This raises the question about what happens if organs themselves become commodities, procurable on the organ market, allegedly representing the one thing suffering subjects desperately need. Transplantation medicine emerges as a technological development with decisive ontological repercussions.

Keywords Commodification • Marxism • Organs as commodities
• Objects of desire • Sublimation • Phantasmagoria

The commodification of objects of desire became an important theme for Lacan, notably in the seminars which he presented during the late 1960s: the era of leftist student revolts, in Paris and elsewhere. In this context, besides building on Freud, he often cites and consults the commodification theory developed by Karl Marx (1867/1979). In this chapter, I will flesh out the conceptual building blocks of Lacan's problematisation of commodities. As indicated, his theories first and foremost lean on Freud but are further elaborated in confrontation with the political-economical views of Marx—which were quite in vogue at that time, and the core focus of attention of his friend Louis Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970).

In the subsequent chapter (Chap. 10), these views will be extrapolated towards organ transplantation medicine as a praxis.

In *Capital* (1867/1979), Marx explains how workers, as soon as they enter the industrial labour market, are duped by capitalists, who face them with a “sardonic grin” (Lacan 1968–1969/2006, p. 65). They receive less than they produce because they are bereft of the surplus value of their labour. They become estranged from the products they actually produced themselves, notably when these products enter the market as commodities. As commodities on display, industrial products acquire a mystical, “phantasmagorical” (1867/1979, p. 86), even “fetish”-like (p. 87) character, Marx argues. To reframe it in Lacanian terms (1968–1969/2006, pp. 16–18), rather than simply being useful entities which may satisfy bodily needs, they become *objects of desire*.

The term fetish is aptly chosen because commodities (on display in a shop window or an advertisement, for instance) should not be conceived as passive or neutral entities. Rather, they are connected with bodies and body parts (partial organs) in various ways. Consumables may incite oral enticements (EAT ME, DRINK ME, as *Alice in Wonderland* phrases it), unleashing oral desire: a craving that goes beyond the mere satisfaction of biological needs. Certain commodities (certain brands of wine or whiskey, for instance) promise singular forms of satisfaction, which the usual products fail to provide. Mattresses, cushions and beds may promise more than merely keeping us warm at night. They may purport to create optimal conditions for erotic pleasure. A bed may simply be a bed (a useful thing), but it may also become a site of primal scenes: the marriage bed where life begins, intimate relationships are consumed and children are conceived and delivered. Other items (such as hammers or motorbikes) may suggest enhanced strength and swiftness, upgraded “phallic” performance. Still others (such as toothbrushes or bath tubs) suggest options for corporeal cleansing and hygiene (the “anal” dimension). Cell phones and CDs may convey the promise of connecting us with the *voice* of the Other, while laptops and tablets may be exceptionally tempting insofar as they promise to connect us with the *gaze* of the Other, allowing the alluring object to enter our *stage*, our *field of vision*, our fantasy-world, as a captivating Gestalt. Finally, inviting images of white beaches and blue lagoons may convey hints of experiences of *jouissance* which we (unconsciously) long for, but which are normally withheld from us. This is how commodities (as objects of desire) speak to us: they enter our life-world by connecting objects with (unconscious) desires. And this explains their phantasmagorical, fetish-like aura: they convey the promise that (after extended periods of hard work)

dreams may finally come true. The commodity purports to bridge the gap between labour and pleasure. Objects from which the labourers became estranged (in the course of the production process) suddenly show up in a commercial, as alluring objects of desire. The pleasure which was renounced during productivity (the hard work of industrial labour) is suddenly retrieved: encapsulated in commodities.

Freud emphasises, moreover, that commodities (as objects of desire) may mimic certain bodily functions, a process he refers to as *Anlehnung*. The commodity reflects and builds on the functioning of a partial organ, so that the desire becomes *displaced* (*verschoben*) from the partial organ to a (technologically reproducible) substitute. Although a commodity is allegedly decontextualised (disconnected from the intimacy of the body), the absent (disconnected) body part is nonetheless still implicated. Insofar as alluring commodities reflect our bodily desires, the next question is: what happens if organs *themselves* become commodities or things for sale? What happens when organs (partial objects) become procurable as market products? What kind of thing or commodity are they?

A first outline of an answer is provided by Freud in his essay *The uncanny* (“Das Unheimliche”, 1919/1947), already briefly discussed earlier, where he argues that partial organs (such as eyes, for instance), separated from the body (as detachable and replaceable parts), are bound to strike us as uncanny, that is, as both fascinating and repelling. The uncanny is that which seems familiar and alienating at the same time, that which should have remained hidden, but is suddenly revealed. The experience of the uncanny indicates that items which are intimately known may suddenly become disconcerting, as stand-alone objects. This seems a fitting description of the experiences evoked by undead organs as living things, procured from brain-dead bodies and placed in a bowl filled with ice. In the next chapter, I will point out how these insights, borrowed from Marx and Freud, are taken up by Lacan, whose seminars (conducted from 1953 up to 1978) coincided with the first (decisive) decades of transplantation medicine.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L., and E. Balibar. 1970. *Lire le capital*. Paris: Maspero.
- Freud, S. 1919/1947. Das Unheimliche. In *Gesammelte Werke XII*, 227–268. London: Imago.
- Lacan, J. 1968–1969/2006. *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan XVI: D’un Autre à l’autre*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Marx, K. 1867/1979. *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Oekonomie 1: der produktionsprozess des Kapitals*. Berlin: Dietz.