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## Two Economics Tropes of Commodity and Capital Fetishism: Sensationalism and Monotony (1700–1900)

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### Abstract

Marx's concept of fetishism expresses a market ideology of capitalist society representing the social world as commodities being exchanged according to immutable laws of the market and being quantifiably produced by machinery. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois economists articulated this market ideology in different forms. Two antinomic tropes are the sensationalist trope, dating from pre-modern times, defining the discursive codes of luxury and technological inventions displayed in the consumer markets; and the trope of monotony, expressing the qualities of industrial production regarding the repetition of unpleasant but necessary work and the regularity of machinery. In the eighteenth century, the trope of sensationalism pertained exclusively to luxury goods traded by merchant capital. In the nineteenth century, the sensationalist trope was intimately tied to commodity and capital fetishism when industrial capital represented itself in the consumerist sphere of merchant capital providing innovative commodities to the popular strata of society. At the same time, political economists grappled with the economic significance of industrial production as they produced the trope of monotonous machinery and industrial work that expressed the ideological essence of commodity and capital fetishism.

### Introduction

From the start of the nineteenth century, the modern capitalist mode of production gradually subsumed labour and its social world under the spell of commodity exchange relations. From a Marxist perspective, this universalizing tendency of commodification went hand in hand with commodity fetishism, the ideological transformation of social relations into inverted commodity relations. Commodity fetishism reifies labour in two ways. First, it socializes labouring subjects as agents of market exchange. Although value can be generated only by the productive capacity of labour, this capacity becomes commodified and exchanged as labour power. Thus, the relations of exchange are reflected into the *raison d'être* of the capitalist production process.<sup>1</sup>

Within this capitalist setting, the workers can solely sustain their physical life processes through selling their labour power and buying the commodities thus produced. These two exchange relations determine their capacity to labour — the capitalist mode of production thus structurally transforms all historical life processes. Commodity fetishism not only entails an ideological mirage representing the material world produced by labour as an endless circulation of commodities, but in fact is the *post festum* result of the value inscribed in the commodity. Commodity fetishism is a semblance of what actually constitutes value, but it is also the direct appearance of capitalist social relations intervening in the subjectivity of all members of

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 44.

society — workers, capitalists, and intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> The ever-present immediacy of the circulation of commodities presents the acts of exchange in a naturalist-realist garb, but, at the same time, is the primary force shaping the alienated subjectivity of the worker.<sup>3</sup> Second, the capitalist production of value in particular cannot emerge without commodity fetishism permeating all facets of historical life processes. Commodity fetishism inseparably exists in production by the workings of the materialized ideological practices of exchange. It is indispensable as a real social force in constructing the capitalist mode of production.

In production, capital grounds alienated labour as the essence of production if commodity fetishism is already posited as the appearance of exchange-value. At the same time, fetishism becomes a general feature of all value-forms and determinate forms of distribution:

The fetish character is not linked to the nature of the mode of production which is at the origin of the commodity but arises as soon as, in commodity society, the individual's labour, whatever its form, exchanges itself through the exchange of the labour product as commodity, in such a way that social labour takes the form of a thing distinct from individuals' activity. The relationship between individuals, which is nothing else than the relationship between their mutual activities, presents itself in the value as the quality of a thing. Therefore if on the one hand fetishism of money is just a developed form of commodity fetishism, on the other hand fetishism transforms itself with the development of capitalist production, into the fetishism of capital, a product of labour that appears to be an autonomous power dominating the worker.<sup>4</sup>

The entire gamut of value-forms reifies the ensemble of social relations through the prism of fetishism.<sup>5</sup> From this fetishistic perspective, historical agents always had to abide by the immutable force of the market as the optimum allocation of scarce commodities. Individuals simply reiterate what has been *a priori* posited as rational and efficient behaviour. The fetishistic exchange model, with its circular flow of commodities, acknowledges neither stratification nor the qualitative differences between what has been commodified. In order to achieve this abstraction of capitalism as a pure market exchange mechanism — ungrounded due to a complete split between antagonistic forms of economic domination and rendering the forms of abstract thought non-contradictory — the money form presented as solely a simple means of exchange and the commodity form as an object of want coincide. While in reality, money as social power is integral to property relations of the means of production, the fetishistic model considers it as merely a semblance of commodity exchange to come. The “want” problem is reduced to a matter of individuals responding to the scarcity of money/objects instead of problematizing the nexus of production, exchange, and money.<sup>6</sup> The capitalist mode of production, being presented as compounded exchange, provides life's necessities.

Commodity fetishism is the articulated ideology of the market representing modern economic practices. On the one hand, fetishism is related to subjects exclusively relying on exchange relations for the material reproduction of their livelihood. Ubiquitous exchange relations are necessary for the ideology of commodity fetishism to firmly root itself in the collective social consciousness in which “the purely social

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<sup>2</sup> Dieter Wolf, *Kritische Theorie und Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin: Berliner Verein zur Förderung der MEGA-Edition, 2004), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Laurent Baronian, *Marx and Living Labour* (London: Routledge, 2013), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1992), 969.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan Foley, “Marx's Theory of Money in Historical Perspective,” in *Marx's Theory of Money: Modern Appraisals*, ed. Fred Moseley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 44.

power of the exchangeability of the commodity [seems to be] a natural property of the product of labor."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the concept of fetishism pertains to all facets of practical life under capitalism: the endless consumption of final consumer objects, labour producing these objects, and machinery augmenting productivity.

Fetishism is intimately related to the fragmented sense of social life in capitalism. All these practices stated above are ideologically conceived as formal relations between individuals and objects. Marx clarified the fetish-like character (*Fetischcharakter*) of social life as a "real inversion of human social powers as attributes of things."<sup>8</sup> The fetish-like character of machinery is perhaps the ultimate vanishing point of human social power because subjects under capitalism must obey the "objective" patterns and rhythms of the machine. As a consequence, people immediately perceive their social world only as the continuous circulation of commodities. Fetishism fragmentizes their social consciousness about the interrelatedness of human practices.

### Fetishism and the Sensationalist Trope

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century economic treatises can be considered as materialized cultural artefacts of the ideology of fetishism. These artefacts are specific fragments of capitalist modernity precisely because commodity fetishism had yet to dominate society. In the nineteenth century, bourgeois economists were still searching for a coherent synoptic model of the commodification of society. They emphasized that they were living in a temporal continuum between the pre-modern and the modern defined by a linear progression of expanding market access to commodities while they also considered fixed capital — the economic term for standardized machinery — as what gave birth to an epochal break with a romanticized pastoral past.

The relation between the emerging history of this fragmentary view of modernity, shattered artefacts, and the temporal process of commodification was already explored by Walter Benjamin:

The exposition of the mythic forms of modernity was to have as its focus the critical analysis of the commodity and its fetishization under the conditions of modern consumer capitalism. The commodity contains within it all the tendencies of nineteenth-century Parisian social life. For Benjamin it was the fragment that held the key to, and disclosed the totality of modern cultural forms. The commodity constitutes the monadological form for the prehistory of modernity.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin's unfinished *Passagenwerk* exposes the everyday religion of the fetishized commodity form by analysing the emergence of the Parisian consumer culture in the material form of the arcades (precursor of the twentieth-century department store). In these arcades, the natural form of the commodities, the immediate use-value of the physical body of the commodity, becomes a vessel of symbolic-material signs of exchange coded and recoded in the social world. Although industry positioned the economic centrality of capital-labour relations, this early modern world struggled with its own multi-temporal experience of capitalism as a cultural complex. Society did not define itself exclusively as a production-centred society; it still fundamentally required tropes from the past to articulate the fetishism of the present. This non-contemporaneity of the present manifested in the fetishistic appearance of the commodity, because:

<sup>7</sup> Guido Starosta, "The Role and Place of 'Commodity Fetishism' in Marx's Systematic-Dialectical Exposition in *Capital*," *Historical Materialism* 25, no.3 (2017): 102.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 118.

To the form of the new means of production, which to begin with is still dominated by the old . . . there correspond images in the collective consciousness in which the new and the old are intermingled. These images are ideals, and in them the collective seeks not only to transfigure, but also to transcend, the immaturity of the social product and the deficiencies of the social order of production.<sup>10</sup>

The arcade shops were deeply indebted to the pre-modern sensationalist trope of luxury goods — mystical, exotic, or otherworldly commercial manifestations of commodity — in order to sell what has been produced by hidden industrial means. Alberto Gabriele gives a clear definition of the sensationalist trope of commodity fetishism. The semantic field of eighteenth-century trope refers to “a theorization of moral sentiment . . . linking it to the cultivation of refinement enabled by commercial culture.” In the nineteenth century, however, sensationalism was related to “the empirical registering of impressions caught by a moving observer in modern capitalism . . . a relation between the observer and the spectacle observed . . . the sensational pertains to the immediate experience of perceiving reality in fragments . . . in which the spectacular qualities of the commodity plays a pivotal role.”<sup>11</sup> John Jervis completes the definition of sensationalism by emphasizing its relevance to “a state of signification in which much of society becomes a theatre for the fictions it has created for its commodities . . . objects come to life as commodities through the spectacle, a vivid emplacement of our experience of the world as a world of commodities . . . commodities that variously entice, seduce or repel us in all their multiplicity.”<sup>12</sup>

The multi-temporal process of fetishism and its sensationalist trope did not occur only in consumerist commodity exchange. In the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, when the forces of production evolved into complex industrial urban hubs, capital fetishism equally came to the fore as the ideological focal point of unfettered capital accumulation. It marked a qualitative break in material conditions for the reproduction of social use-values. Fixed industrial capital flooded the world market with commodities in which use-value was subsumed to exchange-value. For Victorian economists — John Stuart Mill, Alfred Marshall, and Henry Sidgwick — their capitalist ideological image of the propensity to exchange objects of want anticipated the industrial capacity to mass-produce commodities that would facilitate market access for all workers. They viewed the circulation of exchange-value as a pre-modern habit that gave birth to industrial fixed capital. Production by fixed capital means completed optimal exchange processes.<sup>13</sup>

For nineteenth-century French economists — Joseph Garnier, Charles Dunoyer, and Charles Coquelin — the early fetishization of commodity exchange resulted from the “innate” artisan’s ability to transform natural materials into high-quality commodities — the image of the humble and apolitical individual artisan fetishistically denying social agency of an army of disenfranchised workers. The cumulative traditions of skill and diligence led to a market determined by bourgeois taste.<sup>14</sup> In both France and Britain, when these early economists traced the origin of the commodity, they confirmed Benjamin’s thesis of commodity fetishism as a link between the pre-modern and the modern.

The language of commodity fetishism pervaded the emerging industrial system, one which was still partially dependent on artisanal skills and conventions. The question is whether the nineteenth-century economists, in their approval of the industrial system, were reiterating certain perceptions and discourses

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century,” *New Left Review* I/48 (1935, tr. 1968): 79.

<sup>11</sup> Alberto Gabriele, “Introduction,” in *Sensationalism and the Genealogy of Modernity*, ed. Alberto Gabriele (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5–8.

<sup>12</sup> John Jervis, *Sensational Subjects: The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 136.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 299–312.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 39–40.

reminiscent of the moral topics of their eighteenth-century forbearers, and did they continue to exalt the marvel of the invention of machines and luxury products? Was their nineteenth-century world thoroughly converted to the ideological image of fetishism, or did it still contain a moral substance of times past?

Alberto Gabriele's book *Reading Popular Culture in Victorian Print* brought forth the first Benjaminian analysis of Victorian consumer fetishism as a multi-temporal discourse in which the sensationalist trope played a pivotal role. Gabriele expounded on the appearance of the "sensational" in Victorian novels, advertisements, and periodicals. For Gabriele, the sensational was expressed through literary forms and generated by the presentation and representation of consumer commodities in warehouse departments or by early marketing methods. The sensationalist trope buttresses the ideological effectuality of commodity fetishism in the sphere of exchange. Sensationalist statements are located between the aesthetic semblance of the commodity and popular narratives about modern industrialist culture.

Shaped by the mystical force of fetishism, this trope pervades several cultural fields of consumption: from the aesthetic forms of displaying new-fangled commodities signifying novelty and prestige through popular scientific allegories hallowing the industrial engineer as a metaphysical member of a priestly caste, to the shocking and otherworldly effects of technological innovation depicted in popular fiction. With this trope, Gabriele has actuated these artefacts as lived fragments propelling the emergence of commodity fetishism in the sphere of exchange:

Modernity here represents the changes that affected the redrawing of the maps of the culture of industrialization, as seen here in new advertising strategies and in new patterns of consumption of products and ideas . . . with the techniques of a newly structured mass culture. . . . The sensational accumulation of sensorial stimuli contradicts the aesthetic assumptions that privileged a contemplative [work of art] . . . these amusements . . . partake of the periodic nature of performance, of the multiplication of ephemeral entertainment, of the prevalent sensation of passing impressions they stir in the public . . . riveting rhetorical strategies . . . constructing a fictional, sensationalized lure associated to industrial production.<sup>15</sup>

For Gabriele, the sensational trope was intimately tied to the nineteenth-century market ideology of commodity fetishism. To sell commodities well, exchange agents conjured up a fictitious world of consumption in which a commodity was placed. The sensationalist trope was entangled and coded with the direct material properties of the use-value to establish the exchange circuit. This was particularly the case for the first forms of modern advertising.

Nonetheless, the sensationalist trope of fetishism could not simply be traced to one singular point of origin. In displaying industrial commodities as otherworldly luxurious objects, it continuously referred to a pre-modern past, veiling its actual birthplace — the monotony of capitalist production. In short, the sensationalist trope had been revived from pre-modern times to carve out a consumer space separate from the actual "dirty secrets" of the production processes. The pre-modern sensationalist trope had been transposed onto the nineteenth century, and created fascination for modern physical appearances of the commodity and the inventions giving birth to it.

As the study of nineteenth-century economic treatises shows, the transposition of the consumerist trope of sensationalism onto the industrialist repertoires of the political economy did not happen. The political economists were impressed by the endless series of inventions but they naturalized the

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<sup>15</sup> Alberto Gabriele, *Reading Popular Culture in Victorian Print : Belgravia and Sensationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3–82.

commodity's aesthetic qualities as simply differing consumer tastes satisfying the natural wants of a certain social group. The sensationalist trope did not greatly matter to them. They were interested in the apparently self-moving circularity of exchange — commodity fetishism — made possible by fixed capital. For these economists, as Marx had pointed out, commodity fetishism was the “natural” consequence of capital fetishism.<sup>16</sup> Commodity fetishism had been reflected onto production as a self-propelling and monotonous machine always producing the necessary quantity for the current demand.<sup>17</sup> These political economists did not discursively apply the sensationalist trope coded in the ideology of commodity fetishism onto their naturalization of the capitalist relations of production, that is, capital fetishism. The sensationalist trope was the domain of exchanging consumers while the knowledgeable sought to discover the laws of monotonous production and thereby proclaim their ideology of capital fetishism.

In the previous century, Adam Smith had evinced a completely different sentiment about the exchange of luxury commodities. He was not enthralled by the monotonous machine — although considering a simple division of labour as both a curse and a blessing for the nation — simply because it did not yet exist. Luxury goods belonged to an exclusive domain of exchange consisting of an upper stratum of merchants and their aristocratic peers. Smith, contrary to the Victorians, did engage with the sensationalist trope as he simultaneously extolled and condemned luxury goods. For Smith, the physical aesthetic qualities of luxury goods and the emotions they aroused were topics worthy to be scientifically examined. He assessed the social, political, and moral ramifications of luxury markets in terms of sentiments and virtues: arousal, wonder, admiration, self-interest, and self-love, as examples. Smith argued that mercantile capital providing these luxury goods caused great moral disturbances in the minds of the people.<sup>18</sup>

The sensationalist trope was at the heart of Smith's appraisal of the commodity. This is surprising because as we shall see, nineteenth-century economists convinced themselves that they were simply picking up where Smith had ended. And, furthermore, these economists simply presumed that Smith had already developed a theory of market access — the commodity fetishistic concept of conceiving workers as participants of exchange in order to satisfy their wants — allowing them to see a mistaken continuity between Smith's pre-modern market and their capitalist society.

### Pre-modern Economic Philosophy, Luxury, and Social Codes

In the medieval centuries, community life and theologians condemned the dissipation and avarice of mercantile capital. For the Dominican cleric Thomas Aquinas, chrematistic conduct confused honourable trading skills with the promotion of commercial activities solely for the sake of money. Following an Aristotelian ethical viewpoint, *avaritia* (avarice) negatively interfered with the idea of proportionality between subjects because it sustains the idea of unlimited immoderation. Its opposite term in this context, *temperantia* (moderation in terms of self-control), refers to the Christian ideal of subordination of all desires to God's virtuous commandments.<sup>19</sup> Money, exchange-value, and use-value solely have temporal qualities: they are *res temporarii* (things determined by finite time). They exist as expressions of the moderate, finite, and honest necessities of daily life (the Aristotelian notion of *ktèsis mesè*, acquiring the amount of goods being morally acceptable as average and common) regulating proportionate exchange of goods. As the

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 268.

<sup>17</sup> The economist Heinz Kurz considered this as a central opinion being entertained by, for example, the greatest Victorian, John Stuart Mill. See Heinz D. Kurz, “Accumulation, Effective Demand and Income Distribution,” in *Beyond the Steady State: A Revival of Growth Theory*, eds. Joseph Halevi, David Laibman, and Edward J. Nell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 77.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Perelman, *Classical Political Economy: Primitive Accumulation and the Social Division of Labor* (London: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 134.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), Prima Pars, Quaestio 63, 2.

common good, seen as God sanctioning the honest community, possessed the infinite quality as the overall guiding moral principle of economic actions, it also entailed the ethical claim to obtain goods that satisfy human needs within moderate boundaries. Thus, the idea of the common good regulated the exchange of use-values in physical amounts of money. The chrematistic personality denied the finitude of the physical amount of money (*terminum nescit sed in infinitum tendit*, money knows no limit but tends to be infinite) as they ignore God as the one true infinity.<sup>20</sup>

Aquinas' articulation of his reinvented Aristotelian virtue ethics, the organic and systematized codes of his community, and the reformulation of the pre-modern value categories show that his philosophical writings simply did not give any indication that a fetishistic worldview could (in material terms) exist socially.<sup>21</sup> Merchants could provide individuals luxuries for overindulgence, all of whom Aquinas takes to be transgressing the Christian virtues. Further, merchants often thought that money could replace the natural and rational boundaries of scarcity and balance created by God. But Aquinas had never entertained the idea that sufficient commodities were available to supersede the material finitude of the community as a whole. God's rules explained why Aquinas' world was defined by the limitations of pre-modern production.

Aquinas' tracts reflected the reciprocal expectations that existed between nobles, merchants, and masses as to how social distinctions could be normatively symbolized and encoded into the material culture of acquired luxury. The social coding of luxury commodities in medieval times illustrates the profound rift between the pre-modern and the modern. In late medieval times, these goods possessed symbolism whose process of signification — the creation of chains of signifiers construing the symbolic signs — had not been separated from the physical world. For the medieval subject, the aesthetic and ethical qualities were unified in different social and metaphysical spheres, and, in fact, reflected these spheres.<sup>22</sup> The body, adorning itself with richness and beauty, cannot be separated from the exterior objects of representation.<sup>23</sup> They reflected both the circles of kinship and family, communities, and towns, and the body politic under a sovereign. The perpetuation of the proper order of the spheres was tantamount to the will and authority of God. This implied that body, status, objects, and spheres belonged to a single unity, and that the sensational was meant to evoke this unity; a person's rank, sanctioned by God's plan of earthly dispensation, predetermines their value in monetary and commodity terms.<sup>24</sup> Municipal authorities were bent on issuing regulations "dealing with the permitted number of pearls and rings, embroidery and fur linings, and the plunge of a neckline."<sup>25</sup>

Public authorities considered judicially coding the moral consequences of the exchange of luxury goods as their moral duty. This was still the case in the seventeenth century. The directives of the provincial High Court of the *Pays du Grand Clermont* in 1633, for example, clearly show that even higher officials were aware that the members of the merchant class were not generally regarded as virtuous. This court condemned the merchants of the city of Riom as a self-absorbed caste putting their own monetary advantages above all, and the free exchange of luxury goods was regarded as morally detrimental to the city's civic order. Merchants flaunted their wealth by frivolously journeying in the countryside with their embellished

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., *Secunda Secundae*, Quaestio 77, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Eugen Leitherer, *Geschichte der Handels — und Absatzwirtschaftlichen Literatur* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1961), 16–19.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89.

<sup>23</sup> Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1997), 41.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Times* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Wim Blockmans, "The Feeling of Being Oneself," In *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. Wim Blockmans and Antheun Janse (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 1999), 2.

carriages, and thereby infuriating the local aristocratic order. The judges blamed the merchants for the epidemic spread of the excessive love for luxuries.<sup>26</sup>

The legal expert and close associate of the head of the Parisian Parliament, Charles de la Rue, wrote in 1647 that the perverted hydra of avarice and unbounded desire for power and money were the two most despicable causes of violent and criminal passions. Usury, greed, embezzlement, and deliberate deception of and moral harm to others were all criminal passions incited by coveting the other person's property. Merchants dreamt of unbounded wealth; they attracted attention with their tactless and rowdy money-dealing and trading activities. They were socially despised because their conspicuous wealth elicited criminal passions in the minds of others. Honest people were lured into a web of credit and debt in order to acquire luxury goods. At the same time, these law-abiding people were unaware of unethical and secretive trading customs hidden from the communal eye.<sup>27</sup>

### The Eighteenth Century and Its Sensationalist Trope: Adam Smith and the French Enlightenment

Adam Smith did not simply applaud the advent of the economic rule of merchants, nor did he consider his own contemporaneous society as already governed by the principle of market access. His commercial society still exhibited many economic phenomena (guild masters, mercantilist monopolies, etc.) persisting from a pre-modern era. It was not a capitalist society but one in transition toward capitalism.<sup>28</sup> Merchant capital succeeded in intervening in and rearranging the internal exchange chains. Wielding significant political power by means of their own trade corporations and the acquisition of offices, merchants became the leading sellers of basic materials to craftsmen and the buyers of many commodities in order to gain a monopoly in selling them.<sup>29</sup>

No consensus existed among eighteenth-century intellectuals as to whether this transition had to be embraced. Even some radical liberal pamphleteers argued that the *bonum commune* (good society) represented by the corporations, although often identified as a feudal privilege, could serve the general interest.<sup>30</sup> The ideal economic subject, apart from the question of who created the actual surplus product, was represented as the moral equivalent of the independent artisan who served the needs and wants of the people and possessed virtuous qualities of probity and modesty.<sup>31</sup> Reformers also debated the impact of merchant capital on society and the sociability of the people. Merchants emulated the lifestyle of the nobles and tended to blur the different moral and customary representations of wealth — the ordinary objects of daily needs and the sensational qualities of luxurious goods. For many European intellectuals and administrators, the merchant's chrematistic morality could corrupt whole nations.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Conseil Supérieur de Pays du Grand Clermont 1633*. Corpus du factums no. 459, Bibliothèque de la Cour d'Appel de Riom, 1770, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Charles de la Rue, *Le magistrat Chrestien* (Paris: Nicolas Padeloup, 1668 ([1647]), 168–173.

<sup>28</sup> Jelle Versieren, "The Moral Foundations of Adam Smith's Transitional Society: Reappraising Foucault's Representations of Wealth and Marx's Reconstruction of Value Theory," *Capital & Class* 40, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>29</sup> J.R. Kellett, "The Breakdown of Guild and Corporation Control over the Handicraft and Retail Trade in London," *The Economic History Review* 10, no. 3 (1958).

<sup>30</sup> Helmut G. Koenigsberger, "Schlussbetrachtung, Republiken und Republikanismus in Europa der frühen Neuzeit aus Historischer Sicht," in *Republiken und Republikanismus im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Helmut G. Koenigsberger and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1998), 285–302.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776, repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 522.

<sup>32</sup> John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 128; Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 118.



Smith's view of the sensational trope of luxury stemmed from his overall theory of the sentiments, in which he declared that reason and virtues must be understood through the prism of passions socializing our behaviour.<sup>33</sup> The everyday life-processes, analysed as moral conventions, undergirded the sociability of man, in which the expression of the gamut of natural passions was subject to constant social correction. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), three classes of passions steered the moral existence of man: unsocial (e.g., hatred and resentment), social (e.g., generosity and compassion), and selfish (e.g., grief and joy). In themselves, these passions could not be ethically judged. First, Smith required an adequate explanation of how man construes his world of moral conventions. Smith did not break up his theory of morals and passions into separate descriptive and normative components. He explained why certain morals are prevalent in society and provided with his own normative point of view. Second, he rendered the conventional world transparent by means of the simple concept of sympathy. Sympathy allowed one's imagination to recreate the sentiments of one's fellow human being in a particular situation. For Smith, sociability of man existed through the mirroring perspectives of each individual. Man, developing his natural dispositions into social conventions, were simultaneously a moral agent and a spectator. As one assessed the moral adequacy of other individuals, one too was aware that one became the subject of approbation, which Smith called mutual sympathy.

Smith's theory of the sentiments consisted of an image of man driven by the principles of sympathy and mirroring socialization. These two principles were natural prerequisites for appropriate and moderate behaviour. However, Smith also stated that there existed no necessary causality between these principles and appropriate behaviour in reality.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, a mental and a physical category of experience fundamentally determined all social behaviour: imagination and sensation. Imagination allowed man to make cognitive connections between random events and to anticipate hypothetical possibilities. The senses were the most direct means to interact with the exterior world. Imagination and the senses together allowed man to experience sentiments uncaused by any direct exterior impulse. The "sensational" in Smith's theory pertained to anything which could arouse the senses in an ostentatious way. In the case of the sensational qualities of luxury, imagination allowed the senses to respond to the idea of having luxurious objects without actually possessing them. The sensational qualities of luxury simply appealed to imagination of man in that possessing them would improve one's social status and winning the admiration of one's peers.

This is why Smith believed that man eventually should adhere to a set of virtues in order to make sense of his boundless imagination. A truly wise and virtuous person did not depend on the judgment of others.<sup>35</sup> This person should take into account a balance among four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, benevolence, and self-command. Smith's virtues were in effect the reinvention of the old medieval virtues in secular terms: they had to counterbalance the worst unsocial passions aroused by a society bathing in luxury and money.<sup>36</sup> Smith's emphasis on the virtues of self-command and benevolence indicated his high regard for communal values. Self-command, a stoic virtue, counteracted a desire for excessive behaviour, and made man praiseworthy for his balanced and modest actions. Benevolent conduct revealed a profound interest in the well-being of fellow men.<sup>37</sup> The morals of the pre-modern community reproduced these virtues as they wielded far more efficient social control over the moral habits of its members than did the direct use of force by an impartial sovereign or the compulsion of amoral exchange processes. Smith stated that market access in itself could produce a more conscientious man. Commutative justice merely ensured the

<sup>33</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 102.

<sup>34</sup> Athol Fitzgibbons, *Adam Smith's System of Liberty, Wealth, and Virtue: The Moral and Political Foundations of The Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>35</sup> Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 56–58.

<sup>36</sup> Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 854.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

legal protection of the citizens, but the market had to be embedded in a moral economy that preserved the value of virtuous conduct.<sup>38</sup>

For Smith, the sensationalist trope, driven by the passions, of acquiring of luxury goods and other representations of apparent wealth was morally ambiguous. In a commercial society, people often confused self-interest and self-betterment with possessions that mirror the social status of their superiors. In this case, prudence did not serve the final virtuous destination of a fulfilled life of tranquillity and modesty. Rather, as Smith admitted, this commercial society was driven by self-deception. People from all ranks and classes engaged in commercial exchanges in the hope of accruing an income that would allow them to display their success. Their acts of vanity and emulation garbled the ethical difference between seeking admiration from others and being praiseworthy for virtuous conduct. For them, merit equalled the enlargement of personal property, and luxury thereby deceived both reason and virtue. The sensational arousal of acquiring luxury goods, in the end, deceived people. At the same time, vanity, the root of many social conflicts, was a potent motive for individual economic advancement, thereby contributing to the general opulence of society. Taking away luxury would be detrimental for economic growth, although it could undermine the morals of a just society.<sup>39</sup>

The moral effects of the progression of the commercial society brought about a fundamental confusion among people concerning the proper view of aesthetic qualities of both physical objects and social phenomena. Luxury, the result of personal success, gave people a false feeling of aesthetic satisfaction.<sup>40</sup> According to Smith, they evaluated their achievements according to how much their appearance and social status aroused others' imagination, although luck and natural talent could not be ignored.<sup>41</sup> Merchant capital impinging upon the social world broke down the relations between the ethical and the aesthetic. The sensational qualities of personal property became ends in themselves.

Smith expatiated on the intimate relation between the ethical and the aesthetic. Further to his remark that exceptional aesthetic qualities of art could evoke strong feelings of metaphysical ecstasy and breathlessness, art also expressed a much more "profound" and "deeper" meaning about what it tried to imitate.<sup>42</sup> The merchant selling luxury offered only superficial gratification. However, a virtuous person would find something ethical to be sensational because it elicited merit and admiration for its genuine moral existence, which stood at odds with the glamour of the commercial society. Society and people were not morally perfect. In most cases, they could not discern the difference between sensational luxury and the sensational aspects of a virtuous life. Smith contended that the deceptive sensationalist qualities of luxury objects could lead to a state of opulence. Hoping that higher ethical and aesthetic standards could be achieved without these objects is in itself a form of self-deception of the philosopher who confused "ought" with "is."<sup>43</sup> Smith's use of the sensationalist trope indicated that a commercial society was in the making, but he repeatedly reverted to secularized pre-modern Christian and Stoic moral systems that could assuage fear of unhindered asocial passions.

Smith was thoroughly familiar with the ideas of the French Enlightenment as a result of his stays in Paris and Geneva. In fact, both his economic and moral ideas arose from his studies of a vast array of French policy reformers, philosophers, and economists.<sup>44</sup> Smith's moral philosophical project elucidating the

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<sup>38</sup> Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 272.

<sup>39</sup> Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> David D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 89.

<sup>41</sup> Adam Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 154–155.

<sup>42</sup> Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 183–184.

<sup>43</sup> Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Commercial Society*, 149.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Skinner, "Adam Smith: The French Connection," *University of Glasgow Discussion Papers in Economics*, no. 9703 (2007).

sociability of man was in fact intended to formulate the prerequisites for judicial and institutional reform. Smith and his French colleagues debated whether mercantile capital and its capacity to disperse luxury goods could be included in the equation of stimulating the essence of man more virtuous through the melioration of their political institutions. The central question was how to morally appraise the existence of luxury.

The topic of moral condemnation or approval of merchant capital and luxury lingered among intellectuals well into the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1764, the aristocratic reformer Jean-François de Saint-Lambert wrote his entry for Diderot's *Encyclopedia* on the topic of luxury. He came close to literally repeating Smith's theory of sentiments and virtues:

Desire for luxury is and will be present in every man. It is the cause of our passions, our virtues, and our vices . . . luxury cannot be congruent with society's concern for equality and the common good. Moralists took great effort to censure the abominations caused by luxury. . . . These moralists discussed luxury with more ill-tempered disapprovals than with a scientific mind. . . . Luxury became the subject of scientific inquiry for quite a while, especially in political literature. This literature does tend to give much more attention to the merchant class and its trade than it discusses the merits of philosophers or the interests of statesmen. . . . Philosophers state that luxury actually civilizes people and that it engenders the private virtues. . . . They equally say that luxury propels the power of nations and the happiness of citizens. . . . Moralists, on the other hand, unequivocally state that luxury comes hand in hand with great inequality, and thereby ruining the virtues of the rural population. Furthermore, it ruins sentiments of honor and patriotism. . . . Moderate philosophers emphasize that luxury is not leading a people into the abyss unless it circulates in excessive amounts. . . . Philosophers defending the interests of the merchants have failed to answer the question about the consequences of luxury. History has shown that it corrupts nations and empires . . . I believe that . . . luxury contributes to the wealth of our nation when it exists in moderation and does not impinge upon the delivery of products of the soil and the goods of manufactures of first and secondary importance. . . . In this case, it creates a multitude of workers making fashionable goods. . . . Luxury awakens the instinct of the passion that craves for luxury . . . but vicious luxury in excess destroys the moral sentiments of a nation . . . and the passion has to be subordinated under the communal spirit. . . . Luxury is excessive when men of humble decent became suddenly rich, and wealth is taking on a foul smell because they are only interested in power and pleasure. . . . This is certainly the case for wholesaling merchants whose income consists of exchanging goods that were made by craftsmen. . . . Their luxury introduced a new genre of wealth, a genre that is imitated by both the nobles and the commoners [translation by the author]<sup>45</sup>

Saint-Lambert's entry consisted of most of Smith's themes found in both his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*: the sensationalist trope pertaining to the mere superficial aesthetic qualities of luxury, passions, and instincts overriding rationality; the merchant class upsetting the social order; the moral

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, *Essai sur le luxe* (Paris, n.p., 1764), 1–38. The unabridged entry originally published in *Diderot's Encyclopedia* (vol. 9, 1765, 763–771).

ambiguity of wealth and luxury; the merchants' blatant denial of market access for the artisans; and the balance between life's necessities and luxury.

The conservative literary critic Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément, famous for his intellectual brawl with Voltaire about the merits and demerits of modern literature, wrote his first work with the title *Satire sur les abus du luxe* (1770) (A satire on the abuses of luxury). Imitating the literary corpus of ancient Roman satire (Catullus and Juvenal), he also repeated the contempt of Rome's aristocratic class for the *homo novus* (new man). This heterogeneous social group entered the world of the aristocratic *salons* only by the demerit of being engaged in the lowest forms of hustle and bustle at the market places. As well, they combined the lack of morals in the dirty world of trade with a misplaced admiration for conspicuous consumption of their own luxury goods. Merchants were bereft of virtues that could discern the difference between the ethical substance of high art and the vulgar aesthetics of luxury:

The *riche nouveau* (merchant, *homo novus*) succeeded into trading his goods within the circles of great men. . . . He considers only poverty as the only vice. . . . He is excited about everything that has been offered, and therefore will suffer from all its immoral consequences. The fervour of his gold-colored world unites with avarice. . . . Honour and virtue! Replaced by vanity. Superficial words invented for hiding his moral defects and unscrupulousness. . . . The obscure merchant, covered in blush, goes down the street. He is proud that he can be carried around in a dirty carriage. . . . How many of his peers were already impoverished by their conspicuous wealth? [translation by the author]<sup>46</sup>

Clément likewise associated the vain and superficial aesthetic qualities of luxury and the passionate sensations it aroused to the social immodesty of the merchant class. Before the Revolution, Robespierre himself wrote on the moral question of luxury. He univocally condemned both the merchant class and the nobles as slaves to conspicuous consumption:

This splendor . . . elicits the respect and admiration of the people. Splendor exerts imperial force on the people, they are compelled to imitate the mannerisms and repeat the ideas that purportedly would alleviate them from vulgarity. . . . Living large has become the general rule for the people . . . and becomes a merit in itself, and the merchants receive all the political consideration they want . . . luxury has become an exclusive morality. . . . The merchants only evince their vile virtues as they make the most ridiculous things fashionable, while they are abandoning the people. Merchants think that their turgid wealth can ennoble their existence . . . their luxury incites all possible passions. . . . Fashion that holds the people spellbound also promotes the idea of servitude and vanity. . . . while society should in fact ameliorate habits, ideas, and opinions. [translation by the author]<sup>47</sup>

Robespierre thus politicized the sensationalist trope. Enlightenment as a program of political reform should not regard luxury solely as an academic matter. The government should take measures to curb the circulation of luxury goods because luxury as the new morality was a means by which the merchant class

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément, *Satire sur les abus du luxe* (Genève: Le Jay, 1770), 4–15.

<sup>47</sup> Maximilien de Robespierre, *Discours sur les peines infamantes couronné par l'Académie de Metz* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1784), 52–53.

brings the artisans into servitude. Merchants did not dispossess the artisan's condition of labour, but did control market access and thereby held sway over the people by corrupting their virtues.

During the troubled times after Robespierre's daring enterprise to ground the Republic in a set of new moral precepts, Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote his influential book *Le nouveau Paris* (1799). His was a moderate voice of reform, well-known for critical commentary on the *Philosophes* huddled in the salons. For him, mercantile capital squandered valuable resources (riches of the soil and important manufacturing labour) in order to circulate exchange-value without use-value for its own direct benefit. Moreover, the sensation of luxury allowed the masses to indulge in irrational fantasies.<sup>48</sup> According to Mercier, luxury was a handmaiden of the Revolution. The popular strata were driven by their asocial passion for obtaining the riches of the ruling classes, and the Revolution was actually an aestheticized spectacle, a sensational spectacle of destruction, scarifying the ethic substance of the nation — the wise and customary laws of the parliaments and municipalities, the symbolic power of the crown, the church's authority, and the eternal justice governing the nation.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Mercier denounced the role of mercantile capital as a force of progress. Merchants inculcated vanity and disregard for the virtuous life into the people's minds. Mercier feared that justice and the state would descend into the abyss of corruption lest it hold back the free circulation of luxury and rentier activity:

Morality has disappeared. . . . Merchants have taken over the nation with their public display of pleasure and the endless circulation of wares, credit, and bills of exchange . . . they hereby distribute empty flatteries and spectacles. . . . The old spirit of justice has now been called the cunning of mercantile exchange, and theft has been legally sanctioned. . . . The merchant's society consists of money, mutual jealousy, orgies, and bacchanals. [translation by the author]<sup>50</sup>

This condemnation of commerce, in turn, riled other reformers who sought to present their inquiries into the mechanisms of market exchange as the consummation of the scientific breakthrough of how to induce a nation to grow. For example, Pierre-Louis Roederer, a financial advisor of the Napoleonic regime, held moral philosophers such as Mercier to be short-sighted and predisposed toward the instrumental usefulness of mercantile capital for enhancing the opulence of all citizens. Merchants could perhaps not be entitled to stage themselves as the most noble among people, but “when extinguishing the enjoyment of luxury and one-sidedly idolizing the Arts, the productive classes will seize to supply the markets.”<sup>51</sup> Luxury objects, Roederer insisted, beckoned people to work in order to consume. Thus luxury, next to agriculture and basic consumer goods, can be morally permitted because it in effect contributes to the well-being of the nation. However, Roederer also conceded that luxury did not convey an ethical substance — aesthetics as the appearance of truth and virtue — comparable to the arts.

### **The Nineteenth Century, the Disappearance of Labour, and the Trope of Industrial Monotony: John Stuart Mill and Alfred Marshall**

Alberto Gabriele has shown that during the industrialist age the sensationalist trope had fully migrated to the sphere of consumption. It became an apolitical trope expressing commodity fetishism, thereby giving currency to the idea that the world consisted of commodities supplied by the sensational inventions of the industrial class. This new industrial class appropriated the sensationalist trope in order to fabricate its

<sup>48</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le nouveau Paris*, vol. I (n.p.: A. Brunswick, 1799), 381.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le nouveau Paris*, vol. II (Paris: Fuchs, Pougens & Cramer, 1799), 134–179.

<sup>51</sup> Pierre Louis Roederer, *Mémoires d'économie publique, de morale et de politique*, vol. I (Paris: Roederer, 1799), 400.

hegemonic economic ideas. The veneration of the first industrialists as singular geniuses, whose success was ideologically recoded in terms of individual creativity and broad prophetic vision, stemmed from later Victorian times. Starting in the 1840s and 1850s, both governmental bodies and industrial family dynasties sanctioned the invented tradition of portraying them as the symbolic embodiment of realized opportunities within a discourse of social mobility. Hagiographies were written and statues erected to commemorate the alleged hardship of acquiring their fortunes.<sup>52</sup> The profit motive of industrial capital thus disguised itself as a righteous reward for those who were exceptional in turning the world into a compass of commodities.

The practical bourgeoisie, the hitherto unsung heroes of the civilized world, became paradigmatically closely related to the concept of productivity. Mid-century bourgeois novels represented the first Industrial Revolution as a heroic battlefield on which industrialists, depicted as extraordinary individuals, fought for their noble cause against the collusion of the conservative interests of corrupt officials and doltish workers. Although industrialist production was dull when firmly established, the industrialist's entrance on the historical stage had to be represented in pre-modern mythical terms.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the new notion of industrial productivity united the industrialist as a new form of subjectivity and capital fetishism as an ideological thought-form of the physical form of fixed capital — machinery being the symbol of the endless capacity for making more commodities. Capital fetishism blotted out the social relationship between labour and the different capital-forms; fixed capital transformed labour into a passive instrument attached to machinery. The industrialist, although continuously preoccupied by the wage rate when developing the first cost accounting tools, presented machinery as an autonomous productive force melding the simple substances of labour and natural resources. Victorian industrialist dynasties bolstered their symbolic and social prestige by positing themselves as the sole productive segment of society; machinery was linked to the practical inventiveness of the industrialist. As such, capital fetishism discarded labour's distinctive social and technical agency.

Marshall and Mill both considered the ascent of the commercial society as beneficial to the lower strata of society. They assumed, reiterating Smith's ideas, that the impartial functioning of the market allowed workers to optimally valorize their expended labour in material terms. The market empowered workers to free themselves from the political and moral tutelage of hierarchical superiors and to participate in society as civilized citizens.<sup>54</sup> Ethical and economic advancement had to be two sides of the same coin. The exertion of labour could only be truly rewarding if it received its proper share of national wealth. The task of economic science, Marshall asserted, was explaining and clarifying the exact nature of market exchange, in which each person should be able to procure the basic necessities to satisfy their wants and needs. Market exchange, when market access had been established for all parties, functioned as an impartial arbiter and undergirded the ethical demand for a just remuneration of labour. Wealth, the sum of mostly material goods satisfying human wants, needed a price in monetary terms, because only the market allowed people to find the necessities confirming their status as both producers and consumers. In other words, market access guaranteed the existence of "personal wealth," which also included non-marketable and immaterial aspects of life. Market exchange and the general conditions of social life, including the ethical component, could be seen as separate only for methodological reasons — more precisely, within a taxonomic division. At the same time, however, Marshall argued that a coherent ethical theory should substantiate a goal-

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<sup>52</sup> Christine MacLeod, *Heroes of Invention: Technology, Liberalism and British Identity, 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 236–248.

<sup>53</sup> Ayşe Çelikkol, *Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-faire and the Global Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 118–121.

<sup>54</sup> Simon J. Cook, *The Intellectual Foundations of Alfred Marshall's Economic Science: A Rounded Globe of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 250–255.

oriented approach to market mechanisms. Markets as conceptual devices were amoral, but their concrete social existence demanded further moral elucidation.<sup>55</sup>

Mill, whose economic theories set out the first steps of a distinctive scientific discourse that resonated with Victorian bourgeois morals, anticipated Marshall's reformulation of the market-access thesis as the fetishistic means of concealing the exploitative relations of production. Mill witnessed the acceleration of investment in machinery and the exponential growth of commodity output. As an ideologue, he clearly defended the doctrine of industrialism, of which the bourgeoisie became the leading driver. This doctrine portrayed the British Isles as the globe's workshop, enticing other nations to suffuse the burgeoning world market with their own commodities. At the same time, Mill conceded that the people of the growing working class had to spend their lives in economic and social destitution. Nonetheless, Mill apprised his educated readers that the laws of production could not be altered, even if they caused misery for the toiling masses. When money had been turned into productive capital, especially machinery, capital concentration was an inevitable intermediate result of the process of capital accumulation. The enactment of new laws, by which educated people inspired legislators with ideas of moderate reform, could influence the pace of technological innovation, which in turn could attenuate the detrimental social effects of this capital accumulation.<sup>56</sup> Mill, casting Smith into a Victorian industrial mould, also hoped that educating the masses would develop their intellect, because ignorance, profligacy, and dishonesty inhibited any social advancement of the unkempt paupers. For this reason, Mill contributed to the ubiquitous debates on overpopulation as an important cause of poverty, and adhered to the Malthusian indictment of labourers begetting too many children and thereby violating a law of nature.<sup>57</sup>

Mill asserted that a civilized nation, in promoting an industrialist agenda, should take into account the objective laws of production and nature. Commodity exchange laid bare the essential characteristics of societies in progression, and efficient production had to abide the compelling thrust of the market. Smith's most important contribution to economics, according to Mill, was his emphasis on the deterministic nature of these laws over the long term. Social reform, contrary to Malthus' self-justifying indifference to the social question, abated the effects of the enduring incongruity between these laws and the imprudent behaviour of the working classes. Human nature itself, Mill elaborated, was prone to certain rigid behaviours. The most apparent tendency, according to his utilitarian view, was to seek instant gratification by indulging in indolence and luxury, and therefore avoiding the drudgery of strenuous work. Furthermore, Mill's investigations into the laws of production depended on an abstracted and idealized dichotomy within the economic agent: people always had to choose either committing to thrift and social advancement or succumbing to the seduction of short-sighted desires for exorbitant consumption and idleness. Luxury could be acquired only by hard work. The sensationalist qualities of luxury had no scientific or political meaning in themselves. Luxury did not itself promote indolence when the industrial system exerted sufficient economic force to transform individuals into capitalists and workers. As such, luxury was a commodity for those who were rewarded by the market.<sup>58</sup> Mill acknowledged that these laws "were true only in the abstract," but simultaneously concluded that "any placidity in human nature operated in the longer term."<sup>59</sup> If the industrial bourgeoisie chose the road of thrift, inheriting the mercantile wisdom of

<sup>55</sup> Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (1920, repr., New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 54; Peter Groenewegen, *Alfred Marshall: Economist 1842–1924* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 177.

<sup>56</sup> Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill: Two Views of Social Conflict and Social Harmony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 241.

<sup>57</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. II. *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*, books I–II (1848, repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 168.

<sup>58</sup> Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, *The Moral Philosophy of Management: From Quesnay to Keynes* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 98.

<sup>59</sup> Lee Boldeman, *The Cult of the Market: Economic Fundamentalism and Its Discontents* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), 215.

saving in order to earn, the working class should follow its example. Policy reform should not rely on persuasion and assent. Rather, “work has to be enforced” and legislators must pursue “moral compulsion.”<sup>60</sup> For most early liberal reformers, strict surveillance of the poor and inducing “efficient morality” were part and parcel of the attempt to “socialize” their apparently contumacious conduct.<sup>61</sup>

Above all, Mill set his hopes on extending market access to materially and morally improve the labourer’s life. Meagre wages could cover most basic expenditures if the introduction of more machinery could match market capacity. Supplying the market with more commodities, Mill presumed, unintentionally benefited workers, because increased production renders very low wages socially sustainable. In Mill’s land of plenty, even the most modest workers could cut their coat according to their cloth. Mill considered the sensational qualities of luxury as insignificant and not to be appraised as a distinctive moral aspect of capitalism. For Marshall, fashion was merely a temporary and overestimated conception of changing techniques of production. The sensationalist trope ensconced in consumer culture vaguely indicated that production had yet to catch up with the real needs of the nation.<sup>62</sup> At best, the industrialist could sell products at a temporarily higher gross margin when deploying the sensationalist trope in order to make people pay more for a commodity:

That if straw hats come into fashion, or a new book gets sensational reviews & is the talk of the hour, increased supplies can be sold at a higher price is true . . . happening under the impulse of a change of fashion.<sup>63</sup>

Mill did not univocally greet the industrial bourgeois *habitus* with praise. He also bemoaned the unwanted consequences, because “the character of the English is dull.” In modern capitalism, “the real problem is not so much to encourage thrift but rather to awake feelings for the nobler interests in humanity.”<sup>64</sup> For Mill, production became the equivalent of monotony. Machines delivered the expected goods, and workers required few skills to master the mechanics of production. Industrial capitalism created a world of commodities and machinery, and only the inventiveness of the bourgeois class still seemed to appeal to the imagination.<sup>65</sup> The ennui of work came with certain disadvantages. Marshall reiterated Mill’s theory of capitalism without sensational qualities. The repetitive pulse of industrial capital not only dismantled the social coding of a medieval “metaphysical content” of the use-value of a commodity, but its predicted output was quantifiable in both monetary and material terms. Workers were discontented not because they had to endure the monotony of production, but rather, Marshall underlined, because they still believed in the sensationalist trope of consumer society. They were psychologically incapable of realizing that they could not purchase the luxury that they imagined they deserved.<sup>66</sup>

This trope of capital fetishism, monotony, echoed the well-known ideologue of Victorian vulgar Whiggism Andrew Ure who stated in his controversial work *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835) that the routine of industrial processes inevitably took away human agency as the great administrator of

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<sup>60</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol III. *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*, books III–IV (1848, repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 762.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>62</sup> Alfred Marshall, *The Correspondence of Alfred Marshall, Economist*, vol II. *At the Summit, 1891–1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 69; 295; 346.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–175.

<sup>64</sup> Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, *Moral Philosophy of Management*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. III, 71.

<sup>66</sup> Alfred Marshall, *The Correspondence of Alfred Marshall, Economist*, vol. III. *Towards the Close, 1903–1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 287.



production. Until the advent of the modern machine, artisans could autonomously choose how to work. According to Ure, the working class was a new genus totally different from craftsmen, devoid of self-will and contumaciousness.<sup>67</sup> Machinery had produced a new kind of person under its repetitive compulsion.

Marshall attempted to depict the industrial process within a continuum of economic behaviour. He presumed that the *raison d'être* of economic activity was procuring food and a few “conventional necessities.” According to Marshall, luxury was something the working class simply did not need. Only individuals with considerable disposable income were allowed to maintain a higher standard of living. The comparison of needs and wants of particular citizens was reflected in the wage basket of each citizen:

For the sake of giving definiteness to the ideas it may be well to venture on estimates of necessities . . . the strict necessities for an average agricultural family are covered by fifteen or eighteen shillings a week. . . . For the family of the skilled workman living in a town we may take twenty-five or thirty shillings for strict necessities. . . . For a man whose brain has to undergo great continuous strain the strict necessities are perhaps two hundred or two hundred and fifty pounds a year if he is a bachelor: but more than twice as much if he has an expensive family to educate. His conventional necessities depend on the nature of his calling.<sup>68</sup>

Marshall portrayed a society in which market access reflects Mill’s laws of production and nature. The market was a crude and approximate transposition of these laws, and through the manifold activities of exchange, it ensured the fair distribution of commodities. Nonetheless, the monetary value of the remuneration could be neither predicted nor calculated with precision. Customs and cultural habits also determined the distribution of the surplus product. However, since in his late-Victorian mindset neither class analysis nor ideological components determined the reproduction of social relations, Marshall reverted to these laws to vindicate income inequalities. Production gave the income that labourers deserved. Moreover, the mechanic compulsion of the machinery allowed the capitalist class to better calculate the “the correct wage” to pay workers according to the worth of their efforts. The cause of any perceived discrepancy between earnings and acquired commodities was that the workers clearly did not understand that they simply were paid the monetary value of what they contributed to the production processes.<sup>69</sup>

Ultimately, Marshall related these laws to a personal evaluation of labour activities and to the vagaries of a naturalist explanation of a social hierarchy of physical needs. In his romantic worldview, a farmer was completely at peace with his life governed by the paucity of resources, while a fixed natural disposition — exemplified by the locution “the nature of his calling” — sanctioned the market provision of goods to each individual. Thus Marshall straddled two apparent contradictory visions: market access to the commodity liberated the subaltern classes from extra-economical domination, while the social and symbolic status of work should still reflect the use-value of the commodity.

## Conclusion

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Ure, *The Philosophy of Manufactures: Or, an Exposition of the Scientific, Moral and Commercial Economy of the Factory System of Great Britain* (London: Charles Knight, 1835), 20.

<sup>68</sup> Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 70.

<sup>69</sup> Alfred Marshall, *The Correspondence*, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315.

This paper started by emphasizing the importance of Marx's concepts of commodity and capital fetishism in discerning the uniqueness of the capitalist mode of production. Fetishism is an ideological construct in which nineteenth-century economists reflected on the nature of work and industrial production. The nineteenth century was characterized by a fetishized consumer culture through the discursive deployment of the sensationalist trope. However, medieval and early modern philosophers had already recognized the sensationalist trope in regard to the merchant class distributing luxury goods.

The pre-capitalist trope of sensationalism did not utter the same discursivity of fetishism as that of the nineteenth-century fetishized commodity culture. This trope pertained to the moral and political implications of a pre-modern merchant class conveying luxury goods to their consumers in various social and institutional orders. Without a dominant capitalist mode of production, theorizing about markets and commodities remained focused on merchants' economic function of selling luxury goods in overall moral terms. Nonetheless, some philosophers such as Adam Smith and Jean-François de Saint-Lambert emphasized that productive self-betterment also thrived upon a desire for sensational embellishments and ostentatious possessions. At the same time, their contemporaries such as Maximilien de Robespierre and Louis-Sébastien Mercier were disconcerted about the moral effects of the relentless pursuit of luxury goods and the instrumentalization of aesthetic life.

The nineteenth century reinvented the sensationalist trope, however, transposing the pre-modern moral and political features onto the distinct sphere of consumer culture. The emergence of a fetishistic consumer culture was driven by the sensationalist qualities of the commodities and thereby reaffirmed the ideology of commodity fetishism. These discursive differences confirm Marx's theory of fetishism as a phenomenon intimately tied to the industrial capitalist mode of production. In contrast to popular consumer fetishism, nineteenth-century economists such as John Stuart Mill and Alfred Marshall asserted that the entrepreneurial spirit was characterized by eschewing luxury goods. In particular, they translated the ideological language of fetishism in a discourse that can be conceptualized as the trope of monotony of production. They emphasized that a continuous investment in machinery was necessary for capital accumulation. Capitalism in general, they asserted, was characterized by the predictability of the rhythm of machines. All productivity gains were explained by the machines' boundless possibilities. This new kind of fetishism in effect erased the social power of labour.

The sensationalist trope did appear in the writings of these nineteenth-century economists, but they considered it as a psychological phenomenon arising from workers' character deficiencies. Workers were enthralled by a sensationalist consumer culture, which caused them, according to the economists, great mental agony resulting in general social unrest.

Last, the simultaneous reinvention of the sensationalist trope and the appearance of the monotony trope require that the nineteenth century be analysed as a multi-temporal timeframe. Fetishism required both discursivities of the past and novel narrations in order to establish itself as the superstructure of the industrial capitalist mode of production. This explains why the nineteenth-century economists still referred to the older market-access concept to justify the social inequality that their laws of production created.