

Commodities

the DNA of capitalism.

by Ian Cook *et al.*

"The commodity (Karl Marx) says is the 'economic cell form' of capitalism. It is as if he is saying that in the same way that the DNA sequence holds the secret to life, so the commodity is the economic DNA, and hence the secret of modern capitalism" *Michael Watts (1999 p.308)*

Ethelred Andrews. Christopher Taliam. Paul Terris. Andrew Rigobert. Francisco Dubois. Horace Giroudy. Cryil and Felicite Maquis. John Patrick Mathurin. Joseph Belony St. Rose. Ephrem Manchery and Aaron Donovan. Teresa Henry and Solomon Jn. Baptiste. Renicks Doxilly. George, Cleus and Louisa Delice. Gerard Sealy. Nestor Mark and 'Black Man' Williamson Celestin. Vitalis Emmanuel. Joachim Mathurin. Matthew Frederick and Herbert Augustin. Hezekiah Cox. These are the names of 26 Windward Islands banana farmers whose fruits were on sale in UK supermarkets. Shelley Sacks visited them and asked what they'd like to say to UK banana consumers, if they had the chance. As the transcripts show, they wanted to tell them how little money they earned. How it didn't stretch as far as it used to. Their deepening poverty. How that affects them. Their children. Their education. And all of their futures. How these are under threat in a much bigger way by US appeals to the WTO. Which would see their preferential trade agreement with the EU as 'uncompetitive'. Against the principles of 'free trade'. A trade which would see their fruits priced out of the market. Unless those UK consumers help them out by paying a little more. Appreciating their efforts and hardships. Helping to give them a fairer exchange. For their

fruits and their labour. Understanding that global capitalism is made out of relationships between real people. In modern capitalism, Marx observed, social relationships between people are made to appear as abstract relationships between commodities. It's an important deceit. And it's an observation that's obvious but shocking. Especially when the situation is reversed.

"One ... thing that we want the consumers to appreciate is that ... they could assist the farmers by purchasing our fruits. ... If they're willing to purchase them, use them as if they'll be helping human beings just like them. ... Because it is very difficult for a man, or somebody, to produce something. But we who consume it, or make use of it, we have to appreciate the people who produce it"
Renicks Doxilly 1996

In *Exchange Values*, abstract relations between commodities are shown to be social relationships between people. Between the consumers who enter the gallery space and the farmers whose voices and banana skins are waiting for them. It's fantastic to be able to hear what these 26 famers have to say. To hear the skins of their bananas speaking. Yet these are the voices of just 26 people with whom those consumers may have relationships through their money and what they spend it on. How many more are hidden in our everyday transactions? Imagine it was possible to identify, count and learn something about all of those people. If all of those goods, services, financial transactions could talk back. That might make for even more uneasy listening. What would all these people have to say? About how their lives are affected by what we do in our own. Via those transactions. And how would we respond? But

few of us ever get the chance. These connections aren't routinely made. And that's essential. For the everyday exploitations of modern capitalism to be hidden from view.

What *Exchange Values* does is to reveal some of these. In a powerfully tangible way. Here. Now. For four months. With your help. Presenting relations between commodities as relations between people. A rare and disturbing treat. But, it's just the tip of an iceberg if, as Marx argued, commodities really

"Marx started with the commodity because he thought that if one can understand how the commodity was produced, distributed, exchanged and consumed, then one can unravel the whole system ... of relations of capitalism"
Sut Jhally 1987 p.26

are the 'economic cell form' of capitalism. His is a tricky but important theoretical argument. Especially in the original. It's complicated, profound and obvious. Social relationships appear as relationships between commodities. But that basic point needs to be expanded, illustrated, and brought down to earth. To place *Exchange Values* in a wider context.

Let's start with the ways in which consumers encounter commodities. Bananas. Shoes. Chickens. Electricity. Books. Labour. Commodities. Connected. Having their uses. To nourish. To give warmth. To power appliances. To convey ideas. To work. To act. Among other things. Having relative, exchange, values. $t \text{ bananas} = u \text{ pairs of shoes} = v \text{ chickens} = w \text{ units of electricity} = x \text{ hours of paid work}$. Rarely bartered in that way. But valued in an abstract sense. Through money. Itself a commodity. A peculiar one. Because, in capitalist societies, all commodities can be exchanged for money. Not for

chickens. And $t \text{ bananas} = x \text{ hours of paid work} = fy = z \text{ Rand}$.

At today's exchange rates. Which are bound to change. And that's another key point. Changing the exchange values of commodities changes the relationships between the people connected by them.

"It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility"

Karl Marx 1867 p.166.

People. Labour. Money. Things. Exchange values. Connected. Me, for example, living in the UK. People in St Lucia growing the bananas I feed to my baby daughter. People in Macau assembling the 'Diesel' shoes I wear. Those people exchanging their labour for money through the production of things for people like me. Me exchanging my labour for the money I need

to buy the things that they and others make. Them exchanging their labour for the money they need to buy things that other people are paid to make. These are hugely important relationships. Between me, that banana farmer, that shoe factory worker, and countless others. All around the world. And we all need one other. Throughout

"...the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours ... do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material ... relations between persons and social relations between things"
Karl Marx 1867 p.165-6.

our whole lives. To provide our nourishment. Warmth. Power. Ideas. And so much more. To help us to become, and to be, who we are. Whether we plan it that way or not. With our different lifestyles, identities, bodies, families, friendships, you name it. Can any of these *not* involve money, or things for which it can be exchanged?

Pay slips. Bank statements. Till rolls. All are representations of these values, and how they are exchanged. A lecturer's salary, for example. From *The University of Birmingham*. Gross pay. Minus income tax. Minus national insurance. Minus superannuation. Leaving the net pay that's transferred directly into a joint bank account. Mine and Lucy's. *First Direct (Member of the HSBC Group)*. One of many companies our money goes to and through. This salary is one of the values 'paid in' on our bank statement. Many more are listed under 'paid out'. 38 in June 2002, for example. There are direct

"Exchange-value appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which the use values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind. This relation changes constantly with time and place. Hence, exchange value appears to be something accidental and purely relative, ... an intrinsic value ... inseparably connected with the commodity"

Karl Marx 1867 p.128.

debits for household, car and life insurance, our mortgage, my union dues, our car payment, my credit card bill, our council tax. To companies like *Norwich Union, Northern Rock, Legal & General, GE Capital* and *Visa*. There are quite a few cash withdrawals, too. And then the debit card transactions for, among other things, our home internet access, Lucy's new glasses, a swing for Ruby's

birthday, a pair of shoes for me, new summer clothes for all of us, and petrol for our weekend trip to Devon visiting family. Payments to companies like *Freeserve, Boots, the Early Learning Centre, The Gap, Jade* the shoe shop, and *County Garage*, Teignmouth. There's also the debit card payment to *Waitrose*, the food retailer. On the till roll, there are 56 items. Including, *SMA Gold Milk* at £6.09. A Birthday Candle Set at £0.85. *IAMS Adult Cat food* at £3.69. Organic Cheddar at £3.24 Reduced. Fairtrade Bananas at £1.25. Melon Galia Medium at £1.49. Another Melon Galia Medium at £1.49. Buy any 2 save 98p. So, -£0.98. Sweetcorn at £0.89. And so on. Our 'Multivalue Offers' saved us £1.98. Bringing the total bill down to £121.45.

Mmmmm. Yet again, we bought some bananas. A good banana is a marvellous thing, don't you think? The shape. The colour.

The smell. The taste. Of the tropics. The nourishment. The ease of opening. The softness. The price. And ideal as a first food for baby Ruby. My new shoes were marvellous things, too. A brand. *Diesel*. Fashionable. Expensive. They looked good in the shop window. Suede and nylon uppers. Rubber sole. Lace-ups. Brown. All combined quite beautifully. I tried them on inside. They fitted rather well. And they seemed to go very nicely with the jeans I

"(In) the misty realm of religion ... the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour ..."

Karl Marx 1867 p.165

was wearing. They were 'me'. I needed some new shoes. The others were getting tatty. Lucy agreed.

Bananas. Ruby. Me. Those shoes. Lucy. Very local, very close, relationships. Between people and things. But other people, elsewhere, had to organise a large proportion of their lives around making these things for us to buy. So we have relationships with those people, too. Surely! They may have to earn less and/or work longer hours to enable us to make our money stretch a bit further. If products are to be promoted. As 'reduced', 'multivalued', '2 for 1', 'Up to 20% off', and so on.

"The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists ... simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the product of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things"

Karl Marx 1867 p.164.

Saying 'We will not be beaten on price'. Retailers and manufacturers have to compete with one another. Don't they? To meet those targets. To satisfy those shareholders, and 'the city'. To pay their bills. And their workers. Including those 'fat cat' directors, we hear so much about. So, mediated by things, money and 'the market', our changing relationships with our friends and/or child, for example, will have a direct effect on the changing relationships with friends and/or children of hundreds, thousands, millions of people. And, *vice versa* of course. As consumers and as workers. But these interrelationships are largely unseen. Out of view. Over the horizon. With only a hint of connection. 'Product of the Windward Islands'. 'Made in Macau'. On tiny labels. Stuck or sewn onto those things.

Buying a banana, for example, is an extremely sociable activity. 5 billion of them are sold every year in the UK. Huge numbers of people have relationships with huge numbers of people through the banana trade. The Fairtrade bananas we bought at *Waitrose* were from St. Lucia. We exchanged £1.25 for a bagged bunch of five. This transaction tied us into relationships with quite a few people. *Waitrose* have about 25,000 full and part-time staff. They work in 123 stores across England and Wales. Our bananas reached the shelf in one of over 200 trucks. Some were owned by *Waitrose* and others by *Hay's Hauliers*. They were loaded onto that truck at one of two *Waitrose* distribution centres just outside London. They had reached that centre one of another fleet of trucks. Picking them up from one of four 'ripening centres'. They were operated by *Geest*. Our bananas had spent about 5 days there. *Geest* workers assessing and ripening them to *Waitrose's* (and other retailers') specifications. 50-60,000 boxes of bananas were processed there each week. Ours had reached that centre in one of yet another fleet of trucks. Loaded with bananas at *Geest Line's* Windward terminal. At Southampton docks. Owned by *Associated British Ports*. Handling over 35 million tonnes of cargo per year. Directly employing over 10,000 people. To handle fresh produce. Dry and liquid bulks. General cargo. Unit-load (containers and ro-ro). And cruise ship traffic.

Those bananas got to Southampton in one of four, temperature-controlled *Geest Line* ships. One leaves Southampton every Wednesday. It travels to Le Havre in France. Then across the Atlantic. To pick up bananas from Martinique. St Lucia. Antigua. St Kitts. Dominica. Trinidad. Barbados. Grenada. And/or St Vincent. In one of four rotations. In the Windward

Islands alone – Martinique, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada and St Lucia – any one of 15,000 farmers could have grown our bunch of five. Each of them owned a plot of around five acres. Together, they produced about 200,000 tonnes of fruit a year. For the UK alone. So, buying five bananas in *Waitrose* meant entering into relationships with at least 50,000 people. All earning their money, and having their lives organised, in relation to that purchase. At least in part. But it could have been 360,000 people. Or more. If we'd bought cheaper, Ecuadorian bananas from *Sainsbury's*. Grown on plantations, packed in packing houses, and transported in ships owned by *Noboa*. In 1998, anyway. When I last researched this. These relationships are bound to have changed. But why? And how?

Governments. Trading blocks. Banks. Stock markets. Corporations. The WTO. The IMF. More people in organisations actively seeking to maintain and/or modify these relationships. By working at another level. Setting and continually adjusting the exchange values of commodities, labour and money. And exchanging them on a huge scale.

"... in the case of commodity fetishism, social relationships are dismembered and appear to dissolve into relationships between mere things ... so that the sociology of exploitation masquerades as a natural relationship between systemic artefacts"
Michael Taussig 1980 p.32

Making much bigger calculations. About taxing and spending. Setting interest rates. Subsidising exports. Taxing imports. Trying to control inflation. Devaluing currencies. Borrowing to pay debts. Lending with conditions. Buying low to sell high. Taking commissions. Changing the sourcing of goods

and labour. Engaging in 'transfer pricing'. 'Freeing' up world trade. Profiting from other people's labour and the things produced with it. And much, much more. This is why the exchange values of bananas, shoes, chickens, units of electricity, hours of paid work, and the money received are subject to constant change. In relation to one another. And from place to place. These values appear as numbers. Prices. On paper. On screens. Prised apart from those social relationships. Those needs. Those desires. Those people. Abstract commodities behaving in relation to one another. Apparently animate things, in and of themselves. How is the Euro performing against the US dollar? How's the Windward Island banana crop doing? Is our money growing? How can we put our capital to work? Let's examine the numbers. And perhaps the commodities. Are they 'up to spec'? What grade are they? How much are those worth? The results of such abstract calculations have their effects. On countless millions of people. Every day. All around the world. Changing relationships. Between the relative values of labour, money and commodities. And, therefore, between people connected by them.

Vitalis Emmanuel explained this really well to Shelley Sacks. *Exchange Values* wasn't just about getting British consumers to exchange more of their money for these bananas. It was about much more general questions about the relative values of labour, commodities and money. These don't change as the result of natural forces. People change them. Many are better off as a result. Countless others are not. And we're all involved in this. As consumers, workers, people living in capitalist societies. In this gallery space, 26 banana farmers can speak to

'I've been working for 50 years and 30 years ago I used to get up at 6 in the morning and go to bed at 8 at night and earn that much money. And I could feed my children. Now I still work the exact same hours, I get up at six o'clock in the morning, and I earn that much money. And I can't feed my children. So where are these guys? ... Where are these guys who are deciding what money is? This can't be my work, this money, cause I do the same work! The same banana. The same ground" *Vitalis Emmanuel 1996 (in Sacks & Cook 2000)*

their labour determined? And how might the people and processes determining these exchange values connect you to Renicks Doxilly, Vitalis Emmanuel, or an of the other farmers speaking here? You don't have to be a British banana consumer to be part of their lives.

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people who may buy and eat their fruits. Through headphones, attached to panels of stitched banana skins, hanging on the gallery walls. Thousands of loose skins laid out in the centre of the room. With no headphones. No voices. But they're not the only mute commodities in the room. What shoes are you wearing? What's in your wallet or purse? Where are the gallery staff? How, and by whom, are the exchange values of your shoes, your cash and

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