



Research Article

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Commodity Fetishism Again. Labour, Subjectivity and Commodities in “Supply Chains Capitalism”

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to reconnect Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism and the use that he makes of this anthropological category with a general critique of global capitalist relationships. Based on Marx’s anthropological insights into the concept of fetishism, it explores the political relationship between labour, subjectivity and commodities in supply chains capitalism. For this purpose, it empirically examines the materials of ethnographic research on the production of Italian companies that produce in an Eastern European country (Romania) and then sell mainly to countries in Western Europe. In this way, the spatial separation between the places where the investments are made (production) and those where profits are generated (market) becomes very clearcut, just like the alienating division between people and the products of their work. In the light of the Marxian analysis of the commodity form, this detachment will be analysed in a fragment of the productive, organisational and social mosaic of contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: commodity fetishism, anthropology of industrial work, labour conditions, supply chains, global capitalism

Introduction

This article intends to show how Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism is essential to the anthropological analysis of the relationship between labour, subjectivity and commodities in the *global production network*. For obvious reasons, we do not have the ambition to review anthropological discourses on fetishism, animism or magic, but to show that the Marxian category is relevant to the analysis of social relations within the framework of what Anna Tsing (2009) defined as the *supply chains capitalism*. For this purpose, this article empirically examines the materials of ethnographic research on the production of Italian companies that produce in an Eastern European country (Romania) and then sell mainly to countries in Western Europe.

This analysis has been developed in the context of clothing and footwear production, that, although manufactured abroad, has made its name on the world market as “Italian.” This acceptance has been made possible by the fragmentation of production, typical of contemporary capitalism and that has led to the formation of global value chains. Through these, relations between places, enterprises and labour are heterogeneously combined, using the distance between the various sites where the production process is managed and planned and those where it is completed, and between the places where the investments are made and where profits are generated. Relocation of production is a strategy that works both by reducing production costs, exploiting foreign investment incentives and through low wages, with the possibility

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of recruiting and handling the labour force and valorising commodities by *concealing* some parts of the manufacturing process. It also shows, as we shall see, that immateriality has become important for producing wealth.

Critical literature on the social sciences has highlighted the importance of analysing supply chains capitalism to understand “the dilemmas of the human condition” (Tsing 148) or the processes of exploitation, job insecurity and pauperisation connected with the development of production on a global scale (Selwyn). Alienation appears to be a constituent dimension of relations through which territorial units are structured in contemporary capitalism (Sennett). For the Romanian workers who are the subject of this analysis, it materialises both *in* labour, through a strict work discipline that precludes creativity and self-fulfilment (Mollona), and *from* labour owing to the inaccessibility of the products that they themselves have manufactured. This happens not only because the purchasing power of workers’ wages is very low but also because companies use distribution strategies that often exclude the countries where the commodities are produced. For economists this “controlled distribution” of “Italian commodities” in the East has the aim of avoiding its “devaluation” in the West, since the selection of “ethnic,” cultural and symbolic characteristics is extremely important in reinforcing a market “identity.”

Insistence on the “cultural” attributions of the geographical trade mark and *brand*, as we shall see, seems to discredit the production process as such and play a fundamental role in separating the material from the social and in some ways immaterial production of commodities.

Through an analytical process that moves on both sides of the production relationship of “Italian” commodities produced abroad—the consumers’ and the workers’ sides—I will attempt to investigate, in what we could call a genealogical key, “the transformation into a value of what others will understand as a price” (Vatin 103). This aim, in the light of the fact that “this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—[...] conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers” (Marx, *Capital* 168), implies first of all confronting the substantial mystification whereby work seems to be produced by what in fact it produces (Bedeschi). The analysis of the “disappearance” of commodities from the places where production took place and almost by magic, their “reappearance” on the market, can only be an analysis of production and trade relations that constitute the circulation of capital.

The Primacy of the Commodity

The context in which this analysis is developed is production, geographically displaced and reorganised as a network in which companies, customers and subcontractors contribute to the creation of a product. The categories containing the *global value chains* (Gereffi and Korceniewicz) and *global production network* (Henderson *et al.*) have been prepared to represent the organisational interactions linking workers, companies and States (Coe and Jordhus-Lier) and the socio-spatial context in which every productive activity is placed, in a vast scenario. While effectively outlining the dynamic nature of the production networks, they do not bring out the socio-cultural dynamics that direct their deployment, nor the questions connected to power in production, reproduction and control of the labour force. Focusing on the *governance* of enterprises, these categories tend to level out the new stratifications of labour on a global scale in the horizontal perspective evoked by the *network* metaphor (Gregory). The flat scenario that the network evokes through the image of *nodes* connecting and transferring relatively passive resources thus drives the social sciences to identify the control nuclei and the levels of hierarchy variously distributed in space through the movement of capital. To do this, as Anna Tsing has shown, it is essential to question the idea of the homogeneity of capital, analysing its development logic through the operational mechanism of *difference*. This makes it possible to implement the methods for linking different companies and through which capital, in a balance of power, responds to the need to reduce labour costs and govern the labour force. To highlight these aspects, I will concentrate on some “niche-segregating

performances” (150), using case-study material¹ to show that the specific configuration of capital and labour relations may be analysed emblematically, through relations between labour and commodities. I shall then go on to analyse first of all how, from the economic-juridical debate that accompanied Italian delocalisation, the commodities, considered a reality so substantial “that they acquire the appearance of natural beings” (Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* 30), were required to represent specific relations between individuals and the characteristics of their labour.

Decentralisation of Italian production developed from the nineteen seventies nationally and then internationally to enlarge the catchment area for recruiting low wage labour and gain access to new markets. After 1989, much of manufacturing production began to take place in Eastern European countries in transition towards a market economy.² Tax incentives for foreign investors, the possibility of recruiting in the textile sector a labour force already trained in the many State industries that went bankrupt after 1989, the low wages and a shortage of trade union organisations attracted thousands of Italian companies to Romania. Moreover, this country’s strategic position close to the major international transport routes made it easy for them to monitor from Italy the goods produced abroad and to ensure punctual deliveries. In Romania, there has indeed been a growth of supply chains (Crestanello and Tattara, *Industrial Clusters*) involving small companies receiving raw material from Italy and re-exporting a semi-finished or finished product that is sold under the trademark of contractors in Italy. Thanks to the low cost of labour, the latter have thus been able to increase the profit margins of the so-called production *made in Italy* without affecting their identity values—and the proceeds deriving from them.

This trademark’s profitability on the market has led to strong competition between companies that manufacture in Italy and those that take advantage of production abroad. An intense political, economic and legislative debate has ensued as regards the possibility of defining products marketed by Italian companies, but almost exclusively manufactured abroad, as being made in Italy. Both inside and outside the Italian parliament the discussion about the attribution of the trademark has developed between those for whom the Italian localisation of production has been considered a fundamental discrimination and those who have proposed a different relationship between the territory and production. If the former have proposed a meaning of the trademark as the indication of the geographical origin of the whole production process, the latter have asserted the “cultural” significance of the commodities. The representatives of large companies producing abroad, the sector’s associations and several notable entrepreneurs have spoken out, confirming that, when speaking of a product made in Italy, this should not be what is produced, but above all what is “culturally a product of Italy.” In this light, a product made in Italy should not be considered a brand, but an idea referring to the “intrinsic qualities of a culture and a national tradition.” This and not the fact of being materially produced in Italy is the distinctive feature of “Italian” commodities. If it were not so, the foreign entrepreneurial communities in Italy (e.g. Chinese) could lay claim to this title without representing Italian “cultural history.”³

At present, in the European Union, there is no obligation to mention the product’s origin on the label. If production took place in two or more countries, the commodities are considered as originating in the country where the last transformation or *substantial* processing was done. Also in Italian legislation the label “Made in” on commodities marketed in Italy is not compulsory⁴ and the indication of origin must be shown only when the product has specific qualities and characteristics. In the case of the textile, footwear and leather sectors⁵, for example, it is possible to name as made in Italy the finished products for which at least two work processes were carried out in Italy, seeing the requirement of indicating the place of origin of

¹ The case study derives from long-term ethnographic fieldwork on the delocalisation of Italian companies in Romania (Redini, *Frontiere del “made in Italy”*).

² *Transition* is the category used to represent the social, political and economic transformations of the Eastern European countries after 1989. It has been questioned by Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery and by numerous socio-anthropological analyses.

³ I cannot reconstruct the phases of this debate here; therefore I refer you to Redini, *Frontiere del “made in Italy.”*

⁴ Compulsoriness exists only if the country of destination requests it by virtue of its own internal regulation, as in the case of China, the United States and Canada.

⁵ Law 55/2010 that also refers to tannery products and sofas.

each work phase. In short, both commodities manufactured entirely in Italy and those that have undergone a substantial work process can be defined as made in Italy. Due to the importance of the producer of the finished product, we can, therefore, understand the importance of the movement of raw materials and semi-finished products from the country where the contractor resides to the one where the subcontractor works. Through this arrangement, it is possible to complete part of the production abroad, without affecting the Italian nationality of the commodities. In addition, a company can affix marks that qualify the product as Italian while using its own trademark⁶ that in Italian law is a distinctive mark guaranteeing the quality of the product and assuring the consumer a correct evaluation of the commodities they are about to purchase.

An analysis of this legislative debate reveals that the geography evoked by the “made in Italy” concept appears to correspond less and less to the production and to coincide with the market increasingly. The “identity” of the commodities and the properties ascribed to them seems to assume autonomy apart from human social activities and from capitalism as a dynamic process (Sassen). “Italian commodities” are therefore defined through inclusion and exclusion practices—who and what is more or less Italian—that involve “authentic” identities and “collective individuals” imagined as essential. This brings out not only that around which, in this case a productive community, imagines itself but also, evidently what, and who, remains outside this forum (Anderson). This essentialist view of culture and the land must, therefore, be considered by examining the methods used by the institutions, actors and powers to “make geography” (Appadurai 10). The analysis of the strategies with which certain products are included in Italian law cannot be limited to considering the plurality of actors (legislators, entrepreneurs and institutions) that act together, influencing and generating consequences for the others’ actions. The logic that informs the political framework in which commodities are legitimated and become *real* goes together with the economic logic that guides the deployment of the production networks on a world scale. In this light, the legislative process examined appears to be focused not so much and not only on establishing the *authenticity* of the commodities but rather on confirming their *authority*. A production network’s structure, together with the technologies and transport that have made it possible, has altered the traditional hierarchies that nowadays develop using subcontracting systems featuring relationships of cooperation but above all command. In this context, the legislative process concerning goods made in Italy appears to be guided by the attempt to authenticate a specific typology of commodities: those resulting from a law made from the ownership point of view. For this reason, taking the suggestions in Marx’s analysis on the *Thefts of Wood*, the analytical perspective must be shifted from things to relationships or, more precisely, as the anthropologist Michael Taussig points out, “ultimately to command over labour by means of command over people as things” (*The Magic of the State* 136).

A Commodity and Its Body

The debate on products made in Italy concerns the separation of the production phases throughout the value chain and their different geographic localisation. Initially, decentralisation concerned almost exclusively the unskilled, labour intensive phases and later also the more complex ones but not those of the planning and distribution of the product following the logic of the concentration of the labour force without centralisation of control (Harrison). In the business language used by informants during research, this dynamic is represented by separation of the *head* or *soul* of the production process (conception, planning, distribution and sale), which in this case remained in Italy, and the *body* (production) delocalised elsewhere. To analyse how this “anatomy” of production can take shape it is simplistic to consider only the contracts that establish the services performed. Or, more precisely, it is necessary to consider that they can be effective in the context of a system that involves institutions, laws and administrative measures connected in an entirely specific way (Gill; Ong; Pun Ngai). The link connecting these heterogeneous factors is affected by the power asymmetry connoting *a priori* the network configuration of production on a global scale. Becoming part of a network is dependent on financial and technological resources and on alliances

⁶ According to the law, it must be a registered trademark corresponding to an actual commercial and entrepreneurial activity rooted in Italy.

between various actors (Castells) who provide the setting for the importance attributed to those who “guide” the production process compared with those who then make the product.

Examining the social link between workers and the product of their labour, I will analyse how in supply chain capitalism these economic relations shape the form of the commodity and are reflected in it. This objective implies considering the management of production networks as a strategy that to produce commodities must necessarily be accompanied by the subjects’ strategy (Foucault, *Essential Works*).

In transnational supply chains, the hierarchy that traditionally characterises relations within a company does not tend to dilute but to reproduce with even greater intensity. To understand the implications of this we need to consider the demarcation between what customer companies control and what they only indirectly control. They establish costs, methods and production times, while the production companies abroad take charge of organisation and recruitment, training and management of the labour force and, naturally, of any failures. The customer companies’ low production costs policy has set the supply firms against each other for what is at stake and the fact of being vital, which means holding onto a contract. This friction, starting as a relationship between customers and suppliers has become a relationship between suppliers and workers according to the “implacable logic according to which the violence perpetrated is proportional to the violence suffered” (Lordon 47).

The reaction of the Italian supply companies in Romania to the lowering of production costs was to set very intense working hours with tight schedules for the labour force, and like other Eastern European countries, imposing higher levels of production than those enforced during the period of Soviet control. The amount was defined at the start of production according to the chronometric measurement of the hours worked, broken down into phases, calculated and of course accelerated. Individual production levels were closely monitored and had an impact on the wage.⁷ A Romanian female worker interviewed during the research reports in this regard:

I worked for an Italian company that produced jackets and overcoats. I had recently been widowed and needed to work. My daughter was studying and we simply couldn’t make ends meet I worked with a sewing machine but when necessary I was put to work on something else, we weren’t allowed even a moment’s rest; we worked at a frenetic pace The products were only for export, everything was calculated, the raw materials came from Italy for exactly the number of garments that were to be made If you made a mistake, you paid. A sum was retained from our wages and we were very scared and careful because we were working out of necessity.

In footwear production, the entrepreneurs’ exhortations to work faster were accompanied by the use of assembly lines alongside the workbenches. The workers take a piece from the containers on them and transform it on their own work surface and then put it back so it can go on to the next work phase. Using this mechanism, every worker, unaware of the whole process, completes only one phase of the activity, having only their workmate’s shoulders in front of them. Bearing in mind that, given the movement of the assembly line, the workers have to keep up with its speed, to ensure the required quality and quantity levels, quality control experts have been engaged. They walk around the workbenches, continually observing the work underway and, anonymously but known to everyone, entrust a part of their worker control functions to other workers (Redini, *Frontiere del “made in Italy”*). Allowing them, at their discretion, to “supervise and punish,” they have thus succeeded both in making every worker “alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200), and in undermining solidarity among the people who live and work under similar conditions.

In the Marxian understanding of the capitalist production system there is the phenomenological centrality of the body at work when, for example, he recounts the activity of selecting rags, through smallpox that strikes the worker, or the work of young girls plaiting straw, describing the cuts around their mouths and on their hands. In this way, he has emphasised, in a corporeal sense, the worker’s alienation from their organic, inorganic and social body. This is done through removal from humanity in the strict sense—from all who work under the same conditions—and from humanity in the broader sense owing to

⁷ During the field research years (2002-2009), workers in the clothing sector received an average wage of 100 euros. In recent years the average salary is about 250 euros (Clean Clothes Campaign).

the alienating dimension of the machine working, just as the extraneousness of the people working, in relation to the commodity, as we shall see. But it is also the “objectification” of the worker’s body, “captured” in a network of statements and disciplinary actions (Scarry). The principle of calculability and rational mechanisation has concerned not only the sphere of production but also that of reproduction. It has been applied, in Romania as in nineteenth-century England (Thompson), also to toilet breaks and meal breaks. For entrepreneurs the scant trade union presence and when present, actions to prevent mediation, have been important in obtaining these results. However, to “mould” subjectivities “suitable”⁸ for these needs, they have exploited the so-called “non-economic features of identity” (Tsing 157). In the more classical register of capitalist development, an action was needed to ensure that the workers “by education, tradition and habitat looks” would recognise “the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (Marx, *Capital* 899). To this end, they appealed not only to authoritarianism but also to paternalism, blaming backwardness and the simplicity of the Romanian work “culture.” They accused the workers of having a passive attitude, poor reliability, inability to understand the needs of “modern” business, and of showing “attitudes” inherited from Ceaușescu’s communist regime (Redini, *Un nuovo tipo umano*). This rhetoric had an important role in regulating labour because it gave entrepreneurs a chance to demonstrate their role in the hierarchy and their “superiority” or, in other words, their being “capital personified” (Marx, *Capital* 739).

Labour practices thus appeared to use methods apt to make workers collaborative by proposing processes of subjectivisation and enhancement of the worker’s personal qualities but without departing from the logic whereby “the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker” (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 73). In this regard, the testimony of one entrepreneur may be particularly significant. He produces in Romania for an Italian clothing brand and talking of the garments produced; he refers to their “quality” as if it were “an intrinsic fact” that can be expressed only in his *educational* relationship with his workers. In this scenario, he aspires to make the particularly stringent control activities superfluous, as we have seen. He reports:

For Romanians quality is meaningless, Beauty does not have the same meaning that it has for Italians. Romania is just a good source of labour, but for the rest it has nothing that can make a finished product. ... The only solution for Romanians is to offer their services as workers, but with Italian *design* and taste ..., theirs is not an industrial diversity, but a cultural one. Quality as we understand it is not quality as seen all over Eastern Europe We can provide plenty of examples: in the quality of the streets, wearing a suit, having a style. The Romanians must understand that quality is intrinsic to what they do and it is time to put an end to the story that the technician must always be checking ... But for now the problem of checking remains: this is the problem when you are educating and trading.

As I have tried to show until now, to analyse the forms of social relations through which production takes place in the global value chains, we need to consider a heterogeneous set of elements: from the structure of the subcontracting, to power relations within which this takes shape and the way that worker subjectivisation and subjection processes accompany the production process. What should be stressed is that the social connection between individuals and the characteristics of their work acquires the form of relations between things. Continuing the Marxian analysis and as expressed by the Romanian woman, the existence of those who possess nothing but their capacity to work and for whom labour becomes their means of sustenance re-proposes, with extreme relevance, the reduction of the labour force to a commodity. Along these lines, the entrepreneur mentioned above can indicate the capacity to work as the only quality workers have. Through the division of labour, producers are separated from their products. The objective labour conditions are presented to workers as properties that are alien to them “like their non-properties” while the social character of products is *reflected* as the “natural, social property of the thing” (Bedeschi 113). In this reversal lies the arcane quality of the form-commodity, its totally illusory “phantasmagorical” form: in making the social character of work appear as intrinsic to the products themselves, while “it is nothing but

⁸ With regard to the central theme of this article, I concentrate on how the subjectivisation processes, interacting with power, take the form of subjugation. Elsewhere I have analysed the way in which, at the same time, the workers’ *agency* has given rise to forms of resistance (Redini, *Frontiere del “made in Italy”*).

the definite social relation between men themselves” (Marx, *Capital* 165). This is where I wish to take up the analysis of commodities, from the separation of the result of the production process—shown as being endowed with “intrinsic skills”—of the process itself, namely, as I will try to show, of its autonomisation.

Commodity Fetishism Today

When analysing production in supply chain capitalism, it is all the more important to focus on the transformation of a product impregnated with a corporal memory into a commodity since the current valorisation processes instead rely on its intangible components. Investment in so-called “intangible assets” is now considered a decisive factor in creating the value of commodities and enterprises themselves (Rifkin). Among these, the brand is perhaps the most important, in that it is considered able to create “emotional” ties with consumers through the mediation of meanings, experiences, services and through the creation of collective identities. This dynamic is part of the changing order of production and the market that has led to what is known as the post-Fordist restructuring of production processes. Saturation of the mass commodities market typical of Fordism has called for processes of diversification and specialisation of production, which in limited series and without stocks, would be able to respond quickly to consumers’ ever-changing tastes (Piore and Sabel). In this context, the original relationship was reversed: no longer the brand as a symbol of a product, but the latter as a vehicle of the brand. In this way, commodities “by gaining autonomy” from places and knowledge (Gorz), have been increasingly assimilated to some “knowledge carriers” (Rifkin) and considered intangible, that is, they cannot be reduced to their material characteristics.

It has become a question of the devaluation of labour, which certainly does not mean its disappearance (Beaud and Pialoux) but that tends not to recognise its phenomenological dimension and its essentiality in valorisation processes. The concept of commodity fetishism, although elaborated in a spatial, technological and organisational dimension of capitalism different from the contemporary one, remains one of its specific, constituent aspects (Lukács). It is therefore fundamental for focusing on the social relations in production that underlie the modern understanding of the value of commodities. Taking up the notion of fetishism from the eighteenth and nineteenth century contributions from the anthropology of religion (Iacono), Marx used this category to represent the specific form of sociality in an economy based on commodities and on market mediation (Rubin). In this framework, the process with which the commodity conceals relations between individuals—which is their essence—accompanies that of reversal, so the result of the process, separated from it, receives an autonomous existence, namely “natural social properties” (Marx, *Capital* 165). Evidently, this is not an illusion or false belief, but a central political mechanism in the capitalist system through which commodities are all the more animated as the people and relations presiding overproduction are *objectivised*, i.e. considered as *things*.

The exchange of the subject with the object, i.e. the disregard for labour and its product is a mandatory contribution to this analysis since the intangibility of commodities can be asserted, not by disregarding production, but through the possibility of concealing some components of the labour process in the supply chains. As we have seen, the subcontracting mechanism releases the customers from the management of and responsibility for production, creating a condition of independence of the contractors that is only fictitious because their activity cannot be detached from the customers’ in a market increasingly dominated by brands. The latter may be considered “socially aware,” whatever the conditions under which the subcontractors work (Tsing 163), but even before that, be included in the value “all the more so when they stand behind it, as on the face of the currency” (Taussig, *The Magic of the State* 136).

The supply chain analysis has highlighted this new *factory law* that regulates production relations, but in my view does not sufficiently regulate the circulation of commodities and the dissemination of information about the localisation of production. These aspects are crucial for an analysis of how there can be an intangible vision of the value of commodities through the centrality attributed to the market. As André Gorz observed, ownership rights acquire a strategic role, even being classified as monopoly rents. They should not be seen as revenue derived from knowledge, but rather from the knowledge monopoly and above all from the ability to preserve this monopoly. This is why both the confidentiality constraints to

which workers are subjected and the control of information exercised by customers over suppliers are so stringent today and in the context of supply chains power relations, also have great regulatory effectiveness. The businessmen interviewed in Romania are reluctant to name the brands for which they produce, because confidentiality forms the basis of their relationship with their customers. They are mindful of this aspect because, as the economic analyses have shown, delocalisation of production has been a factor of “competitive repositioning” of Italian companies as regards production, but for the market, a risk of the *devaluation* of commodities and of “pollution” of the so-called “primary markets” (Crestanello and Tattara, *Concessioni e competenze*). For this reason, the decentralisation of production has corresponded to specific circulation strategies.

In Romania as in other low-cost labour countries, customers do not partially market the commodities that are manufactured there, and if they do, it is primarily through mono-brand stores. These spaces are organised through a policy of *franchising* control and licences and in the context of the exchange they reproduce the ways in which production takes place in the supply chains, namely a “social and political management of the network through a brand, rather than with direct disciplinary or administrative constraints” (Lazzarato 56). The parent company offers a tradesman the brand and the commodity on condition that the latter adjusts the premises, their conduct and that of their staff, to the brand directives. These factors intervene in the process of valorisation of commodities because the circumstances under which a given object is placed radically affect its “authenticity” recalling the *hic et nunc* of the original (Benjamin).

A commodity produced in Romania thus loses track of its Romanian producers and gains an “Italian” identity through the place where it is on show (an “Italian” store), furnishings from Italy and the price, because a garment in a store of this kind may have a cost equal to the monthly wage of the worker who produced it. In the most classical register of alienated work and expropriation, in this case, too, the wealth created by the worker is placed before him and contrasts him with the wealth of others (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*). Asked to explain this restriction in circulation, while acknowledging the gap between the cost of labour and the price of commodities, the entrepreneurs blame the fact that the Romanian clientele would not be “ready” to appreciate the quality of an Italian brand of products. The contradiction whereby the Romanian workers manufacture products whose quality they would not be able to perceive is all the more evocative of the arcane of commodity-form. In other words, the fact that “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx, *Capital* 164-5).

The organisation of this marketing network should, therefore, be interpreted in the light of the shift in the axis of attribution of the value of production to the market. In this process that has been defined as the passage from a supply economy to a demand economy, consumption appears as the “moment around which the whole valorisation cycle is structured” (Lazzarato 91) and the market, as the “detector of the truth” (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*). It appears not only as the principal “place” of the valorisation of “real” commodities, but above all as the moment in which to reaffirm, in the context of the supply chains capitalism hierarchy, the government of individuals “according to the same principles and laws (of natural order) that govern the functioning of economic processes” (Nicoli 89).

Conclusion

In recent years, an extensive, far-reaching investigation has made public the working conditions and wages enforced by famous brands which produce abroad at a low cost. The response to these cases elaborated in supply chain capitalism has been the reconfiguration of the basic structure through hierarchic relations formalised as independent contracts. In this way the production networks tend to show a dimension of cohesion and uniformity externally, concealing the conflicts and hierarchy that effectively make them function internally. The global production network envisages continuous interaction between the production of commodities, production of subjectivities and forms of control. An analysis of the context of production and exchange, therefore, shows a broad definition of alienation. It is referable not only to the

mortification of the body at work and to the extraneousness with which the products are seen by whoever created them, but also to the strategic absence of the body of the producer in the product. This aspect implicitly recalled by the legislative debate is crucially important for the process of social authentication of “Italian” commodities made in Romania. To analyse this autonomisation of the product of the production process it is essential to refer to Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, i.e. to the process whereby, while subjective human or social labour appears in the form of an intrinsic quality of the things themselves, the latter in their turn—endowed with their own subjective or social qualities—appear so to speak to be personified and animated, almost as though they were autonomous subjects.

The “phantom-like objectivity” (Marx, *Capital* 128) with which commodities appear on the market is certainly determined by the representations acting as interaction at work and tracing the contours of the humanity inhabiting this objectivity (Mezzadra and Neilson). Addressing the disappearance of the producer in the product, Marx investigated the procedure through which the work spent in the production of a useful article ends up by becoming “an ‘objective’ property of that article” (Marx, *Capital* 154). This *inversion* process is a fundamental factor in determining the passages through which, both in production and in exchange, the social and individual specificities of work are not only obscured but seem *mediated* by commodities. Following Marx’s invitation to consider first of all that “the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume,” I tried to show through which procedures “the more powerful labour becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker” (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 73). In line with the Marxian approach, I left the paradigm of exchange and entering “into the abode of production” (Marx, *Capital* 279), I have attempted to show that procedures for the autonomisation of commodities go together with those with which workers and productive relationships are *reified*, i.e. considered as *things*.

It is fundamental to explore the connection between enterprises’ organisational models, the social imagination linked with commodities and the processes of disciplining work, to understand the human-object relations of this type and to highlight the social asymmetries that accompany contemporary capitalism.

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