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NEEDS, EXCHANGES AND THE FETISHISM OF OBJECTS*

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I: Introduction

The anthropologist Raymond Firth has written: "I was once asked by the late Robert Redfield to address his seminar with reference to the question, 'What can one say of a man — any man?' My theme in reply was that at some points of his social existence every man will engage in acts of exchange."[1] In this remark there seems to echo the opening passages of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, where it is said that the "propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another . . . is common to all men." Those who are looking for an account of the human essence, and who have considered the options ranging from *homo faber* to *homo ludens*, may have overlooked an obvious candidate: *homo mercator*, man the trader.

In fact Firth's point is not the same as Smith's. From the latter stemmed a tradition in modern political economy which judged the material output of "savage" societies according to an invidious criterion of economic rationality and found them wanting. Firth's work, on the other hand, is one of the most important contributions to the twentieth-century economic anthropology which has altered fundamentally our understanding of earlier human cultures. This research exposed the fallacy of attempting to fit all human history into the conceptual mold of a market society. (Of course Marxism tried to do this as well, but less successfully, for it shared with its bourgeois opponents the need to find a linear logic in history.)

The restricted scope of market exchanges in many primitive societies caused many earlier observers to misrepresent their socio-economic arrangements.

*for Herbert Marcuse, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

The most notorious example is perhaps the theory of *primitive communism*. Private property, division of labour, the striving for individual reward, marginal utility calculations, and extensive exchanges both within and among tribal units flourished, but they were concealed to some extent by the customary principles of reciprocity and redistribution which controlled their nature and scope. The fact that they occurred largely (but not entirely) in non-market contexts disguised how much they shared — in terms of their social functions — with similar activities in market contexts. For in many primitive societies, "the channels of social obligations function as a substitute for a market."[2]

In this paper I have followed the interpretation that looks at both the "material exchange of man and nature" (Marx) and the network of exchanges among persons as functions of more general cultural determinants.[3] As Marshall Sahlins puts it, in primitive exchange "the material flow underwrites or initiates social relations."[4] This perspective suggests there are certain underlying continuities spanning what seems to be the unbridgeable gulf between primitive and industrial market societies; not that the discontinuities are less real or unimportant. Simplistically, exchange relationships constitute the chief element of continuity, and the market versus non-market context of exchanges marks the chief element of discontinuity.

This paper's purpose is to explore new routes toward a critical theory of needs for contemporary society.[5] It was prompted primarily by my conviction that neither of the two main approaches in the received radical critique of capitalism — the theory of reification and commodity fetishism and the distinction between true and false needs — provides an adequate basis for a critical evaluation of social change possibilities in today's society. A previous paper argued that an examination of the symbolic properties of goods is a key element in a theory of commodity fetishism, and it undertook a trial examination of them by analyzing advertisements with the aid of concepts used in communications theory. This paper tries to strengthen that case. Its basic presupposition is that some light can be shed on problems in the theory of needs by seeking to uncover structured features in the "system of objects" (Baudrillard's phrase) which is the principal source of the satisfaction of needs in a market society.

The paper takes a roundabout path. Its starting-point is the perspective on contemporary society developed by Tibor Scitovsky (*The Joyless Economy*) and Fred Hirsch (*Social Limits to Growth*), which was discussed briefly in the previous paper. These studies focus on three significant features in the consumption or consumer behaviour side of our present-day economy: (1) the importance of interpersonal comparisons or social ranking; (2) the relationship between this emulative behaviour and goods consumption; (3) the symbolic determinations of rank and prestige in economic activity.

All three features were also prominent in many (but not all) primitive societies. The more limited physical dimensions of those societies, and the more limited range of goods with which they operated casts those features into sharp relief. I suggest that exploring the expression of those "primitive" behaviour patterns can aid our understanding of how the dialectic of needs and objects is expressed in our industrial market society.

The generalized market exchanges introduced by capitalist society break down the barriers to exchange and by means of a universal currency give a common denominator to all objects. Thus it would seem at first glance that there is little point in reviewing the very different structured exchanges of primitive societies, if one's objective is to better understand the interplay of needs and objects in our own industrial market society. Some reasons for undertaking this kind of comparative exercise are offered in Marshall Sahlins' *Culture and Practical Reason*. Sahlins' primary objective is to argue that there is a common thread uniting all types of human societies, from the primitive to the modern — the action of culture in shaping the material exchanges between humans and the natural environment. In different ways the symbolic structures expressed in cultural forms define the society's conception of material utility, the selection and transformation of natural materials into desired objects. This is the common thread or continuum in human culture, ". . . in Western culture the economy is the main site of symbolic production. For us the production of goods is at the same time the privileged mode of symbolic production and transmission, . . . by comparison with a 'primitive' world where the locus of symbolic differentiation remains social relations, principally kinship relations, and other spheres of activity are ordered by the operative distinctions of kinship."[6]

The key point in this approach is the notion that behind the abstract equivalence of objects (exchange-value) expressed by the universal medium of exchange (money) in modern society, *needs and the objects of needs are structured by symbolic or cultural determinations.* Sahlins briefly discusses food and clothing to illustrate the application of his approach to contemporary consumption patterns; I will return to this in Section IV. The presupposition of my own adaptation of it is that investigating these structured determinations of the objects of needs — *i.e.*, commodities — is a potentially fruitful method for a critical theory of needs.

One finds in advertising the most obvious example of the systematic linking of symbols and objects in our society. The study by Kline and Leiss offers some evidence for the view that there are significant patterned or structured elements in advertising's association between goods and imagery, reinforcing the similar conclusions reached by somewhat different routes in the researches of Leymore and Williamson.[7] Although advertisements in themselves cannot be interpreted as indicators of the structure of needs, they may yield some

clues that will enable us to frame more precise questions (including research designs for empirical studies of attitudes and behaviour) about how persons develop their understanding of their needs in our high-intensity market setting. These inquiries in turn might enable us to better comprehend the latent social change possibilities in capitalist societies today.

The following sections trace out this roundabout approach to a critical theory of needs. Section II investigates the genealogy of Scitovsky's and Hirsch's notion of the importance of emulative behaviour in economic activity as a way of justifying another look at the *prestige economy* in primitive societies. Section III offers some illustrations of how the prestige economy used goods or material objects as symbols of social differentiation and interpersonal comparisons. Section IV offers some suggestions for applying the notion of ranked classes of goods to the dialectic of needs and objects in contemporary society.

II: Emulation, Pecuniary and Other

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* Veblen wrote: "With the exception of the instinct for self-preservation, the propensity for emulation is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper."[8] One can say that Veblen sought to depict the prestige economy of a market society.

The chapter entitled "Pecuniary Emulation" is the centrepiece of *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* For Veblen all the manifest occupations of a market society, notably the accumulation of property, were found upon analysis to have a less tangible, but more strongly determining, source: "The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; . . . The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction." The fact that all specific types of wealth can be reduced to a single (pecuniary) standard in a generalized exchange economy is the decisive factor in the way that the propensity for emulation expresses itself in a market society. For then all tangible forms of wealth are merely the momentary signs of relative success, and do not have any lasting significance.

A pecuniary standard for interpersonal comparisons is an abstract, infinitely malleable standard. Individual success is a striving for a horizon of social honour that recedes with every approach:

> But as fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably greater satisfaction than the earlier standard

> did . . . So long as the comparison [with others] is distinctly unfavourable to himself the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; and when he has reached what may be called the normal pecuniary standard of the community, or of his class in the community, this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless striving to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard.

The economic growth brought about by industrial capitalism multiplies opportunities to reap material benefits from this restless striving, but not without paradoxical results, for "no general increase of the community's wealth can make any approach to satiating this need."[9] Every attained level is merely the jumping-off point for another round of competitive emulation which features newly-devised tokens of success in the consumer goods arena.

In Veblen's view conspicuous consumption is not confined to persons in the higher income levels; it is simply most conspicuous there. As a fundamental economic motive its traces are found universally in the ordinary life patterns of almost everyone, excluding only the very poorest persons (who display it as soon as they cease to be very poor). It manifests itself in what he calls the element of "conspicuous or honorific waste" — or the "quasi-decorative" aspect — present in the mundane satisfactions of life's necessities. (He seems to have in mind everything that exceeds the strictly functional maintenance of biological life.) Using the economists' term, he suggests that "many of the utilities required for a comfortable existence by civilised men are of a ceremonial character."[10] Using Sahlins' terminology one would call this the "symbolic structure in material utility."

Veblen's book, like its author, occupies a curious place in its field. Its main thrust was assumed to be, by its admirers and detractors alike, consonant with the general socialist critique of bourgeois society. (A few readers sought clarification of its message, which they found ambiguous, but Veblen steadfastly refused — as was his wont — to make it more explicit.) After its initial publication, the book was republished often by small left-wing presses. Yet its emphasis on the universal character of the propensity for emulation, rooted (it is implied) either in human nature or in the nature of human society as such, jars with the standard socialist theory, which attributes such proclivities to the distorting effects of capitalist economic relations.

Veblen's caution, concealing his own position behind a smoke-screen of brilliantly inventive terminology, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to discern his point. There is little uncertainty, however, about the strong technocratic bent in his thinking. The anarchy of the marketplace was the

chief evil to be overcome, and it would be overcome by placing *engineers* in command of society's productive apparatus.[11] We can only surmise — since Veblen does not elaborate — what impact such a transfer would have on the ceremonial character of everyday consumption patterns. Would the engineers resolve to extirpate the emulative propensity root and branch, for example, by issuing one and only one type in each product category, such as shoes? Or would they allow that a certain amount of variation in style and material composition is still within the boundaries of rational desire (a true need), although whatever exceeded the decreed limits (false needs) would have to be repressed?

For the most part Veblen's work was taken seriously by those who interpreted *The Theory of the Leisure Class* as an ethical objection to the frivolous excesses of upper-class wastrels. This interpretation obscured the real difficulty in his outlook, namely his apparent use of a bleak functionalist standard to measure the degree of "honorific waste" in everyday life. (His personal household, with its packing-crate furniture and coarse wool clothing, seems to indicate that he did indeed construe functionalism narrowly.) Read as a general account of individual behaviour at all levels (above that of grinding poverty) in a market society, the presumed critical thrust in Veblen's book loses most (if not all) of its force. One reason is that emulation appears rather benign in its consequences, when it takes the form of competition for possessions. So far as I can tell, Veblen does not say that widespread differences in wealth among social classes (or the brutal exploitation of the poor's labour) inevitably result from it. Thus if the propensity is so evenly distributed among the population, and if its workings are relatively benign, it would be sheer misanthropy to complain of it.

There is another curious aspect. Veblen chose as his key concept an idea that had been common in modern social thought for a long time. The direct source for it was his reading of the political economy current in his day. The *emulative propensity* was said to be an insatiable want on the individual level and the motor of economic progress on the social level.[12] Perhaps Veblen's original objective was simply to balance its enthusiastic endorsement in the texts of political economy with an account of what were for him its less savoury characteristics. In any event the argument of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, like the rest of Veblen's thought, remains something of a bastard offspring in the household of the socialist theory which chose to adopt it.

Despite its shortcomings *The Theory of the Leisure Class* continues to be an interesting and important book. The best evidence of this is the thematic continuity between it and the recent studies by Scitovsky and Hirsch.[13] Three of the principal themes in the latter, as well as numerous subsidiary points, have their analogues in Veblen's work (they are not identical and in any case

are derived independently). Scitovsky's "rank-happiness" and Hirsch's "positional competition" are more precise formulations, related to empirical evidence, of the propensity for emulation. The effort to erect what Veblen called "invidious distinctions" through open-ended goods accumulation, with potentially infinite permutations, has become, through the proliferation of types of goods, higher personal incomes in the population as a whole, and the omnipresent mass communications media, a regular feature of everyday life. The pervasive symbolic manipulations which link goods with images of well-being also testify to the importance of what Veblen named, in more elegant language, the ceremonial character of utility.

I am persuaded by the evidence offered by Scitovsky and Hirsch that the importance of this venerable theme in social thought cannot be underestimated. I believe it should be recognized as a central concept in the theory of needs. In that context its immediate effect is to undermine static categories and to require more relational and contextual ones. Furthermore, the propensity for emulation as a principal drive in the articulation of human needs is closely related to (1) social mechanisms of exchange in both market and non-market contexts and (2) the symbolic veil cast over material objects in cultural traditions.

My primary purpose here is not to suggest that it is either possible or desirable to devise a general theory of human needs with the notions of emulation, exchange, and symbolic determinations, but rather to urge that we reconsider the concepts of reification, commodity fetishism, and false consciousness — as the key concepts in the radical critique of capitalist market relations — with the aid of such notions. Despite the fact that these concepts have been employed in the radical critique for over a century, they remain undeveloped and problematic. We must know more about the relationship between the commodity form in general, which makes possible an extremely fluid and ever-changing field of objects for the satisfaction of needs, and the structured character of human needing itself (assuming that needs are structured in some way). Moreover, if we maintain that the commodity form represents some kind of "limit" to the articulation of needs, and further that it is a limit which we should strive to overcome on account of its alleged deleterious effects, we must try to say more clearly what the nature of that limit is, what alternative arrangements are possible, and why we should expect the majority of citizens in industrial market societies to opt for an alternative way at some point.

In its high-intensity phase, where the majority of citizens have access to a huge array of goods, the market society throws up invidious distinctions everywhere. We are urged constantly to compare the advantages of one brand over another, one class of goods over another, one marginal increment of satisfaction over another, one set of values over another, indeed one "lifestyle

package" over another. Yet what is the basis for comparison? The marketplace gradually dissolves fixed customary traditions (such as the distinctive cuisine and dress of older ethnic or national groups) by which the appropriateness of an individual's tastes used to be judged. In a modern market society the bases of interpersonal comparison change continuously. It is as difficult to analyze those shifts as it is to navigate them.

It is this difficulty in locating a foothold for analysis that prompts me to suggest that we step back for a moment and look at the structured exchange processes in some primitive societies. Their more limited physical dimensions and assortment of goods throws some of the features of their exchange relationships into sharper relief. This by no means implies that those relationships are "simpler" than our own. When they are viewed in relation to the full set of social interactions (especially reciprocity in kinship relations) to which they belong, their complexity is in fact overwhelming.[14] I discuss them here for a particular purpose in abstraction from their contextual setting.

Here we find a familiar attribute, the propensity for emulation. It is not exactly as a universal feature, but as a sufficiently frequent occurrence in different human cultures, in widely separated areas of the earth, to warrant special attention — nor was it a merely incidental feature of those societies. The "desire for emulation", Firth writes, was "the industrial spur of the old Maori economy."[15]

The origins of the dual economy (subsistence and prestige) in primitive society need not concern us here. The specific nature of the duality varies considerably, but the following characteristics are common: (1) each of the two "economies" has its own types of goods or objects; (2) goods are classified in ranked, discontinuous, or incommensurable spheres of exchanges; (3) social differentiation, including the attribute of prestige, is related to manipulations of a specific class of goods, not all goods; (4) prestige goods reflect a deliberately or artificially created scarcity which stems from the arbitrary ascription of symbolic significance to material objects.

III: Spheres of Exchange

Raymond Firth has commented that we should not take this distinction to mean that the two types of activity are rigidly separated. There are commonly some overlapping points between them. "What is useful, however, in such labels is the directing of our attention to major overt elements in the demand schedule of the economic system, primitive or advanced. Such notions involve a separation in the quality of wants."[16] Goods and objects are classified into two major categories (there are further subdivisions, as we shall see), each with a mode of exchange appropriate to it: barter on the one hand, and objects that

serve as media of exchange for status values on the other. These are the visible manifestations of the structured character of needs or wants, for the two activities are normally kept quite distinct by virtue of segregating the kinds of goods thought to be appropriate to each type. How common this is may be seen in the spheres of exchange devised by different cultures.[17]

A fairly simple and straightforward division is customary in Ponapea, one of the Caroline Islands in Micronesia. The subsistence economy consists of food, clothing, and shelter items ordinarily produced and consumed by household members. Food consists of small yams, bananas, fresh breadfruit, coconut, and seafood. The prestige economy is largely confined to the annual feasts, which feature competition among individuals with respect to two goods, both food items: very large yams and breadfruit aged for long periods in leaf wrappings. Growing the larger yams requires special skills and careful tending for years; the places where they are grown are concealed and they are tended in secret, usually under cover of darkness. The flavour of the breadfruit improves with age; the wrappings must be changed periodically, and prestige is related to the age of the item. Both are brought to the feasts and shared, and a consensus is reached on the relative quality of the offerings.[18]

The best-known example of prestige competition in North America is of course that which occurred among the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, who lived in a region of great natural abundance: "The Kwakiutl, even more than most peoples in the world, were obsessed with rank — indeed, in the midst of such plenty they created artificial shortages in the social system and their striving for high social position was an integral part of the economy."[19] Subsistence goods did not figure at all in the prestige competition, which was confined to just two kinds of objects, blankets and large pieces of engraved copper. Competition among potlatch rivals involved increasing numbers of blankets, until one ended it by offering a copper piece; this competition was ended in turn by the destruction of copper pieces, the victory going to the one who was deemed to have destroyed the piece of greatest value. The rivalry was structured as a conversion of designated objects in a ritualized series of exchanges which culminated by translating material values "into the purest value: reputation" (Bohannan).

Bohannan's work on the economy of the Tiv offers one of the best examples of ranked and discontinuous spheres of exchange. In the subsistence economy are included food (yams, cereals, vegetables, seasonings, chicken, goats, sheep), household utensils (mortars, grindstones, calabashes, baskets, pots). and some tools. Exchanges among them take place by gift giving and in a market which traditionally used no money, only barter. The prestige economy is two-tiered. One category includes slaves, cattle, ritual offices, a special type of cloth, medicines, and brass rods. Exchanges among these take place at ceremonial and other special occasions only, and within this category brass

rods serve as a medium of exchange. Above this category stands another with a single "good": the exchange of rights in women.

The ranking of the spheres is crucial. Transactions of goods between the spheres is necessary, for example when a large amount of food is required for a feast and must be paid for with brass rods, or when the rods were used to purchase a wife. But one strives to avoid exchanging higher-category goods for lower-category ones, and he who must do so suffers loss of prestige. (The brass rods are only a true equivalent within the second category.) Conversely, one strives to convert lower-category goods into the higher.[20]

Richard Salisbury paid special attention to spheres of exchange in his study of the Siane people of the New Guinea highlands, and on the basis of his work it is possible to make some finer discriminations that may apply to other examples discussed above. He found it necessary to distinguish not two but three "nexuses of activity" in economic life, each of which corresponds to a distinctive assortment of goods and objects used exclusively in relation to it. His discussion stresses the crucial and determining role that the discontinuous spheres of exchange play in the social life of the group. He calls them the subsistence, luxury, and ceremonial nexuses of activity.

Subsistence goods include everyday food items (sweet potatoes and other vegetables), tools, clothing, and housing. They are produced both individually and collectively within each clan and responsibility for producing them is shared informally in that context. These activities maintain both the accepted kinship relations in the group and the basic consumption level enjoyed by everyone. They provide a minimal consumption "floor" for each individual and are derived from natural materials that are relatively plentiful.

Luxury goods encompass tobacco, palm oil, pandanus nuts, salt, snake-skins for drums, stone for axe-blades, and palm wood for spears. These are produced or acquired by individual initiative, are exchanged on the basis of reciprocity, and the direct consumption items among them are enjoyed either privately or in entertaining visitors, where "generosity" is a virtue. This is a kind of intermediate category of goods, which allows for the expression of different individual preferences (unlike the subsistence sphere, where there is little or no variation), and seems to work against excessive rigidity in social behaviour by permitting the introduction of new goods and practices through individual initiative.

Ceremonial goods are valuables exchanged by barter at public events. This category includes shells, ornamental axes, necklaces, plumes, headdresses, and pigs. Exchanges take place both within and among clans and they create return obligations; this is an arena of "strict reciprocity" where a detailed accounting of value is kept. The individual — and by association the clan of which he is a member — create obligations to themselves from others in making presentations of ceremonial goods, and thus increase his and their

prestige. It is also the means of social mobility for the individual within his clan.

There is very little crossing of the boundaries between the different types of goods; the only one mentioned specifically by Salisbury is the infrequent exchange of pigs for salt (the latter is very scarce and is a monopoly of the clan which occupies the only salt deposit). The barriers among goods and objects are at the same time the structuring characteristics of social relations: "The more general rule is that commodities are used only in situations where the nexus of activity is clearly one of intra-clan help, inter-clan presentation, or exchange between trade friends; no commodity can be used in an ambiguous situation."[21] Not only are ceremonial goods never exchanged for food or luxuries, but persons who exchange the latter two cannot also exchange the former.

Of special interest to Salisbury was the fact that he witnessed the impact of a new technology (steel rather than stone for axe-blades) on the closed, hierarchical spheres of exchange. The far greater efficiency and durability of the steel blades released significant amounts of new "free time" for the population. There was no change in the production of types of subsistence goods, since this could not have happened without disrupting fundamental role relationships (only men own and use axes to clear planting areas — which women then tend — and to build houses). Rather, the new time was absorbed exclusively in extending the sphere of prestige competition — the most elastic area of demand, to use the economists' term — by fighting and by exchanging the material tokens of prestige.

Salisbury gives an excellent summary statement of the social functions performed by the discontinuous spheres of exchange and the structured character of the needs for which they are the means of satisfaction:

> . . . the presence in non-monetary societies of discrete scales of value . . . is a simple mechanism insuring that subsistence goods are used to maintain a basic standard of life below which no one falls; that free-flowing power [prestige] is allocated peacefully, with a minimum of exploitation (or disturbance of the individual's right to subsistence) and in accordance with accepted standards; that the means of insuring flexibility in the society do not disrupt the formal allocation of statuses in the society or the means of gaining power.[22]

After comparing the ranked spheres of exchange among the Siane with analogous practices elsewhere, Salisbury offers a way of looking at at least

some commodities in our society from this perspective. He suggests that in important goods, like the automobile, the three nexuses of activity are mixed together but that it is also possible to distinguish them analytically. There is a "subsistence" nexus in respect to its manifest use-value (it conveys passengers), a luxury nexus in all the optional "extras" for greater comfort and convenience that most purchasers choose, and a ceremonial or prestige nexus in the comparative levels of size, style, and cost.[23]

Three points are worthy of note in attempting to assess these materials for comparative purposes. They concern the structured nature of needs or wants, the relation between prestige and types of objects, and the question whether one may properly speak of a fetishism of objects in this context.

The hierarchical and discontinuous spheres of exchange are in a sense only the visible manifestation of qualitative distinctions in the assortment of human needs. Rather than emerging as an undifferentiated series, of a merely quantitative scope, human needs appear — universally, I think it is safe to say — in groups or clusters that reflect efforts to define meaningful, "complete" spheres of activity. The number of discrete and identifiable needs and their objects in any sphere seems less significant, on the whole, than the nature of the qualitative distinctions which mark the boundaries between them. Yet in remarking this pattern one must be attentive to the rich variations in detail that lend it colour. The important point is the principle of structured discrimination. Attempts to pin it down too precisely, notably Maslow's hierarchy of needs, trivialize the process of needing; for in order to achieve sufficient generality, the categories of analysis must be reduced to their barren skeletal outline. (Think of "food", on the one hand, and the marvelous over-indulgence in a feast ceremony by which a fellow tries to augment his prestige, on the other.) Any research scheme utilizing the principle of structured discrimination should develop its specific analytical categories in a dialogue with specific empirical materials.[24]

A great variety of goods or objects are employed as prestige tokens, as we have seen. This stems from the very nature of the enterprise. What is required is a physical counter for human relationships, an arbitrarily-chosen sign for a complex set of attributes (skill, initiative, inherited status, luck, ambition, courage, and so forth). What the group of counters must be able to signify is the requisite degree of discrimination in the process of social differentiation. Where there are many accepted competitors for prestige, for example, the set of tokens as a whole must be sufficiently divisible so that it is possible to discern the relative success of each. Prestige tokens reflect artificial scarcities, and such scarcities may be multiplied indefinitely as the need for finer discriminations arises. They may or may not embody significant amounts of skilled labour, artistic talent, or precious natural materials. The only general requirement is that they be kept separate from subsistence uses.

Whether we should speak here of a "fetishism of objects" is partly a matter of definition, since many of these societies have fetish-devices in the strict sense — *i.e.*, objects thought capable of performing operations (spells, witchcraft) on persons — that are not the same as their prestige tokens, it is probably unwise to do so. If by a fetish we refer to any situation in which a material object "stands for" a social relation (thus making it virtually synonymous with what is intended by the concept of reification), and especially if all such situations are thought to be unfortunate by their very nature, difficulties arise.[25] For to mark a social relation by means of a material thing is precisely what prestige tokens are intended to do. Moreover, most societies which employ them clearly recognize that *these social relations themselves* — *i.e.*, the process of social differentiation through prestige competition — are potentially dangerous in their consequences, and they have explicit, well-established countervailing mechanisms (*e.g.*, redistribution) to contain those dangers.[26] They do not seem to be at all mystified, for example, by the reified forms of *those* social relationships. Thus it does not appear justifiable to me to view the prestige economy of primitive societies as an expression of the fetishism of objects.

We may now turn to the question of what bearing these three points have on the dialectic of needs and objects in our industrial market society. In applying this comparative perspective we are encouraged to look for the structured discriminations of needs that may be present, and (if we think we do discern evidence of them) to ask how they express themselves in relation to the abstract equivalence in the field of objects (exchange value or the commodity form). We can ask how the pecuniary form of the propensity for emulation, which arises in a market exchange society based on commodity production, differs in its characteristics and social consequences from the non-pecuniary form based on discontinuous spheres of exchange. For example, if we accept Salisbury's claim about the conflation of different nexuses of activity in a uniform sphere of market-exchange goods, we might ask: What are the individual and social consequences, if any, of pursuing prestige competition in a situation where all easily-recognizable distinctions between prestige and non-prestige categories have collapsed? Finally, is it possible to ground the concepts of reification and the fetishism of commodities for our society in the collapsing of spheres of exchange?

IV: Commodity Fetishism Once More

Jean Baudrillard opens his book, *Le système des objets*, with the following questions: "Can one classify the immense vegetation of objects like flora and fauna, with tropical and northern species, abrupt mutations, and

disappearing species?... Can one hope to classify a constantly changing world of objects and arrive at a descriptive system?" To answer them he develops a scheme based on categories such as arrangement and environment, together with various sub-categories, and concludes with his first presentation of the thesis (elaborated in later books) that consumption today involves the "systematic manipulation of signs" which as a whole form a behavioural "code". This means (so far as I can understand the thesis) that objects tend to lose any substantial link with discrete domains of activity (eating, for example) — an "interior" relation — and constitute an externally-related series or mere collection of things which only represent abstract designations ("colonial" furniture, "sporty" clothing, "gourmet" frozen foods).[27]

Baudrillard is one of a number of French theorists for whom symbolic determinations provide the key for understanding generalized commodity production.[28] Baudrillard extends the semiological approach to embrace political economy and suggests that there is a strict analogy between the nature of a sign and the nature of the commodity form. The two-fold character of the sign, as signifier (the sign's manifest form) and as signified (its meaning), duplicates the duality of use value (the material or utilitarian aspect) and exchange value (the relation with other things) in the commodity. In D'Amico's words: "We are to understand the connection as follows: exchange value and signifier designate *relational* forms, whereas use value and the signified stand for the *content* or object of the relations."

Baudrillard wishes to found, on this basis, a theory of the fetishism of commodities that is different from Marx's. He understands Marx's theory as linking this fetishism solely to one side (exchange value) of the commodity form, since the other (use value) is an unambiguous quality, the commodity's capacity for satisfying *some* human need. Baudrillard maintains, in opposition to this reading of Marx, that utility or use value is just as much an abstract form of the object as is exchange value:

> For there to be exchange value it is already necessary that *utility* become the principle of reality for the object as product. Exchange presupposes that the objects are already *rationalized as useful.* The reduction to utility is the basis for both exchange and systematization — the preconditions, in Baudrillard, for fetishism (which he defines as the reduction of the symbolic-ambivalent to the systematic-equivalent). For Baudrillard exchange and the equivalence-form are made possible by an object's being made comparable through the common denominator of functional-rational. (Only the objects of symbolic

> exchange retain their true singularity and incommensurability). Therefore, to be more radical than Marx is to see the priority of the object form over the commodity form.[29]

This passage shows what is for Baudrillard the criterion for distinguishing fetishized from non-fetishized exchanges. The latter is restricted to events which have (allegedly) an irreducible singularity; examples are gift-giving and the feast ceremonies of primitive societies. Apparently all reductions to a standard of equivalence are a form of fetishism.

There is much of value in Baudrillard's work. He was (to the best of my knowledge) the first sympathetic reader of Marx to argue against the standard Marxist formulation of the concept of commodity fetishism.[30] His is also an effective challenge to any who locate the problematic aspect of capitalist market relations solely in the commodity form *per se* and who regard the relation of need and use value as unambiguous. These advantages, however, are largely negated by its defects, which arise both from its dubious theoretical stance and from a style of expression notable for its consistent hyperbole.

Baudrillard's concept of fetishism is so all-encompassing that it overwhelms the data of experience it seeks to address. For *some* aspect of equivalence is a necessary part of all exchange. To be sure the equivalence represented in exchange based on reciprocity is not the same as that represented in commodity exchange, but it is a kind of equivalence nonetheless. It is customary — both in primitive societies and in our own — not to calculate too finely the exchange value of a single gift, but where the parties to gift exchanges are of the same status any long-term imbalance will be regarded as a deliberate affront. Similarly market and non-market exchanges in general, which employ varying standards of equivalence, reflect qualitatively different contexts of social relations. The contrast of "systematic-equivalent" with "symbolic-ambivalent" prevents us from making the necessary discriminations among diverse contexts of exchange relationships.

Baudrillard's approach is a prime example of what we might term a premature conceptual synthesis, premature in two senses. First, it terminates the dialogue between analytical concepts and empirical data almost as soon as it has begun; the former exercises an authoritative sway, so to speak, which the latter is not permitted to challenge. Second, it forecloses on the range of questions that might be posed as the inquiry proceeds. For example, if we insist that "*the same* logic (and *the same* fetishism) is at work on the two sides of the commodity specified by Marx, use value and exchange value",[31] we have in effect decided *a priori* not to allow the data to show any significant elements of tension between the two sides that may be present in our experience with commodity exchange production.

The more measured approach of Marshall Sahlins rescues these materials from such conceptual autarchy and thus holds open new lines of inquiry. His emphasis on "the symbolic structure in material utility" does not tempt him to reduce the concept of utility (use value) to some allegedly more primordial "object form" or to dissolve the dynamic tension between use value and exchange value. Rather, he opens up the concept of utility itself in order to search for the differentiated structures of meaning within, in order to repair the imbalance found in Marx's work. He cites the *Grundrisse:* "The commodity itself appears as unity of two aspects. It is *use value, i.e.*, object of the satisfaction of any system whatever of human needs. This is its material side, which the most disparate epochs of production may have in common, and whose examination therefore lies beyond political economy."[32] He suggests that we must extend the investigation of commodity production by dissecting the material side:

> The material forces taken by themselves are lifeless. Their specific motions and determinate consequences can be stipulated only by progressively compounding them with the coordinates of the cultural order . . . An industrial technology in itself does not dictate whether it will be run by men or by women, in the day or at night, by wage laborers or by collective owners, on Tuesday or on Sunday, for a profit or for a livelihood; in the service of national security or private gluttony; to produce hand-fed dogs or stall-fed cattle, blue collars or white dresses; to pollute the rivers and infect the atmosphere or to itself slowly rust away like the Singer sewing machine posed majestically in front of the house of an African Chief.[33]

A theory that ignores the inter-penetration of the concrete material and cultural (symbolic) determinants in the satisfaction of needs, restricting itself instead entirely to its formal structure (the commodity form under capitalist relations of production), will remain unable to explain processes of social change in precisely that kind of society which the theory pretends to have as its object of analysis — a society where the self-understanding of persons has been formed under conditions of fully developed capitalist market relations.

Utility is not constituted exclusively by the properties of a good but instead by the relation between them and the demand schedules of persons: this much is already conventional wisdom in marginal utility theory. However, in defining utility as *no more than* "psychological utility" this theory imme-

diately short-circuits discussion of the social and cultural determinants of individual psychology. The "process of social life in which men reciprocally define objects in terms of themselves and themselves in terms of objects"[34] is here reduced to its crudest dimensions. So the consumer behaviour researchers labour to find direct correlations between an individual's personality attributes and his or her preferences for specific brands. One study found a significant correlation between the attribute "need for dominance superior to need for affiliation" and a preference for Fords over Chevrolets and vice versa. Unfortunately these studies as a whole showed that, although particular correlations were often significant, the results could not be generalized across product types.[35]

In fact a cultural system of interpretation (called a "code" by those who follow the French theorists) intervenes between persons and objects. It includes autonomous domains, not determined by the mode of production, that structure individual experience and behaviour. Sahlins discusses two examples in North American life today, involving food and clothing. The uses of animals for meat are structured in a number of ways, including edible (cattle and pigs) versus inedible (dogs and horses) sources and a hierarchy of preferences with respect to edible sources (flesh versus organ parts). Styles of clothing reflect and reinforce general behaviour patterns, such as male/female and work/leisure distinctions; and the variations within this class of objects allow a host of differentiations in the social order to be expressed. The infinite manipulation of materials made possible by industrial technology permits this society to develop a far larger set of differentiating signs than was possible earlier. Yet however broad or narrow its range may be, the world of produced objects always represents "man speaking to man through the medium of things."[36]

It is still fruitful to follow Marx's lead and to view the understanding of the commodity form as (at the very least) the initial problem for our analytical efforts. However, I believe we must proceed on the assumption that we do not yet understand it. We must do more than feed new data into the old program. In my view the sources discussed in this essay (especially Scitovsky, Hirsch, and Sahlins) put us on the threshold of significant new departures for the theory of advanced capitalist society. In what follows I have indicated only the outlines of specific topics that could be pursued on the basis of the preceding discussion.

1. *Reification and False Consciousness* One of the commonest features of human cultures is the use of objects to mark social distinctions among persons. Under many different kinds of circumstances the attributes associated with those distinctions may be transferred to the objects themselves, which then would come to possess a degree of autonomy *vis-à-vis* human agents who had lost control of the symbolic meanings vested in them.

Those meanings, now with a "life of their own", can act as a counterweight to the spontaneous development of newer cultural forms arising in response to environmental and social changes. If some terminological license be permitted, reification could be termed a "negative externality" in the process of objectification, where by the latter we understand the transformation of nature into physical forms that express human creativity.

The ideologies of early capitalism, which represented economic relations as the outcome of the workings of universally-applicable natural laws, were reified forms of social consciousness. In them the real social transformations which created those economic relations (such as the forcing of labour-power into the commodity form) were concealed and distorted; social policy, it was said, had to "obey" the laws of the marketplace. However, the gradual acceptance of increasing governmental manipulation of the economy has largely (but not entirely) made this form of reified consciousness obsolete. It is not clear whether it has been replaced, on the level of overall public understanding of the relation between economy and public policy, by some other forms.

The theory of false needs implies that the locus of reified understanding has shifted in a sense from the sphere of production to that of consumption. This theory suggests that there is a pervasive manipulation of desire or distortion in the relation between needs and the objects of satisfaction. Given the cultural variability of needs, however, it has proved difficult for the theory to go beyond the vaguest generalizations.[37] Until it is able to do so it will not be possible for us to evaluate the contention; and unless it does so it runs the risk of being considered as merely an invidious distinction. In general any theory of false consciousness should be able to be clearer than those in the past have been about just what kinds of "mystification" occur as a result of capitalist exchange relationships.

2. *Reification and Commodity Fetishism* In Marxist thought the fetishism of commodities is by and large a special case of reification. What was said above of the latter applies as well to the former.[38] Specifically, it is implausible to suggest that persons are "ruled" by whatever meanings are projected onto the world of commodities. Rather, those commodities seem to be more and more the perfectly transparent repositories of those meanings — *i.e.*, the satisfaction of needs takes place in the context of an open-ended competitive emulation, where the assortment of both objects and symbols is constantly reshuffled.

It may be possible, however, to re-interpret those concepts in this new context. The ranked and discontinuous spheres of exchange abolished by commodity production may re-appear as qualitatively distinct spheres of meaning within the commodity form itself. (Recall Salisbury's point about the dimensions of subsistence, luxury, and ceremony or prestige in the

automobile.) This requires careful investigation to see whether a fruitful line of inquiry may be developed. One possible implication may be noted. The effectiveness of the prestige economy in primitive societies seems to depend in large part on (1) its segregation from non-prestige (subsistence) pursuits and (2) the specification of a closed set of counters as prestige tokens. Both principles are violated in the prestige competitions in market society. If the competition is more open-ended, the signs of success are also less clear and stable; thus it is both more extensive, encroaching on all aspects of everyday life, and — perhaps — less satisfying in its outcome, since the tokens of merit have no lasting value. Prestige too is threatened by inflationary pressures. The diffusion of prestige competition throughout the domain of consumption may provide a basis for re-interpreting the concept of reification in the context of the commodity form.[39]

3. *Exchange in Market and Non-market Contexts* Changes in the larger context of market relations and their social functions have long been advocated as part of the socialist opposition to capitalism. Some of the arguments about the different stages through which socialist societies are supposed to evolve, or about the differences between socialism and communism, turn on this point. Yet in Marxist theory at least, according to Stanley Moore, these arguments have still not been sufficiently clarified.[40] Such issues as the scope of commodity production, alternative types of exchange relationships, and the types of social differentiation require close re-examination in socialist theory. The enterprise will be more productive if, instead of confining itself to speculative treatises, it also looks at the instructive experiences with these matters that have occurred under the state-socialist regimes.[41]

4. *The Comparative Perspective: Concluding Notes* The anthropological materials are especially interesting on one point: the linkages between prestige and its material tokens are quite arbitrary. This has some significance for our own society, where similar linkages in recent times rely on goods and lifestyles that place heavy demands on resources and energy. This has made it difficult to know how to deal with the serious inequities in the distribution of income, since raising others to a higher standard would further intensify those demands. A different approach may bring a happier solution to this dilemma. It is possible that relatively inoffensive ways may be found to re-interpret prestige values in terms of less resource-extravagant goods. Given the arbitrary character of such values, there is no reason to suppose that the results will be less fair or less satisfying.

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Notes

1. Raymond Firth, *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 1965, p. 18.

2. Firth, *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, p. 36.

3. In the literature on economic anthropology there is a debate over the applicability of modern economic categories (capital investment, for example) to the analysis of primitive societies. The strengths and weaknesses of the different positions are not relevant to the purpose of this paper; my orientation is based on the intermediate position championed by Firth. See Raymond Firth, ed., *Themes in Economic Anthropology*, London: Tavistock, 1967.

4. Marshall Sahlins, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange", in his *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago: Aldine, 1972, p. 186.

5. Others are Stephen Kline and William Leiss, "Advertising, Needs and 'Commodity Fetishism' ", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter, 1978, pp. 5-30; and William Leiss, "Marx and Macpherson: Needs, Utilities and Self-Development", (forthcoming).

6. Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 211.

7. V. L. Leymore, *Hidden Myth: The Structure of Symbolism in Advertising*, London: Heinemann, 1975; Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, London: Marion Boyars, 1978.

8. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York: Vanguard Press, 1926, p. 110.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6, 31, 32.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 157ff.

11. This is the theme of *The Engineers and the Price System*, a series of essays first published in the magazine *The Dial* in 1919, and it can be found throughout Veblen's thought: see Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and his America*, New York: A. M. Kelley, 1961, *passim.*

12. See Dorfman, *op. cit.*, p. 62. One of Veblen's sources was J. B. Clark, *The Philosophy of Wealth* (1885). For an earlier example see Rousseau's remarks in Roger Masters, ed., *The First and Second Discourses*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964, pp. 149, 156, 174-5. *Cf.* C. B. Macpherson, "Needs and Wants: an Ontological or Historical Problem?" in Ross Fitzgerald, ed., *Human Needs and Politics*, London: Pergamon Press, 1977, pp. 28-9.

13. And indeed Staffan Linder's marvelous book, *The Harried Leisure Class*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

14. For one example see the discussion of ceremonial exchange among the Tikopia in Firth, *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, pp. 320-332.

15. Raymond Firth, *Economics of the New Zealand Maori*, 2nd ed., Wellington, N.Z.: Government Printer, 1959, p. 450; see also p. 167.

16. Firth, *Economics of the New Zealand Maori*, p. 41.

17. Cora DuBois, "The Wealth Concept as an Integrative Factor in Tolowa-Tututni Culture", in *Essays in Anthropology presented to A.L. Kroeber*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936, pp. 49-65, is the earliest piece I have found that uses the subsistence-prestige economy terms. In addition to the examples given below, see: Paul Bohannan, *Social Anthropology*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, pp. 233-240 (Trobriand Islands); Firth, *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, pp. 340-344 (Tikopia); and W. R. Bascom "Social Status, Wealth and Individual Differences among the Yoruba", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 55, 1951.

18. W. R. Bascom, "Ponapean Prestige Economy", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 4, 1948, pp. 211-221.

19. Bohannan, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

20. Bohannan, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-253. See especially p. 252: "Tiv are scornful of a man who is merely rich in subsistence goods (or, today, in money). If, having adequate subsistence, he does not seek prestige in accordance with the old counters, or if he does not strive for more wives, and hence more children, the fault must be personal inadequacy. They also note that they all try to keep a man from making conversions; jealous kinsmen of a rich man will bewitch him and his people by fetishes, in order to make him expend his wealth on sacrifices to repair the fetishes, thus maintaining economic equality . . . Therefore, the man who converts his wealth into higher categories is successful — he has a 'strong heart'. He is both feared and respected."

21. R. F. Salisbury, *From Stone to Steel*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 103.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 212; *cf.* Mary Douglas, "Primitive Rationing: A Study in Controlled Exchange", in Firth, ed., *Themes in Economic Anthropology*, pp. 136-138.

23. *Op. cit.*, p. 204.

24. One example of what may be missed with excessively abstract categories: In most primitive societies the ranked spheres of needs and exchanges are intrinsically related to role determinations. Thus the prestige economy is almost entirely a male preserve. This is hardly an inconsequential fact for the theory of human needs.

25. Thus the "broad" meaning of "fetish" offered by Webster's collegiate dictionary is, "any material object regarded with superstitious or extravagant trust or reverence." It also has a technical meaning in psychoanalytic literature that is widely known.

26. I do not mean to imply here that social relations in these societies were a perfect expression of the proper interplay of individual and group, or that there were no regressive elements (the widespread fetishistic practices are sufficient evidence to the contrary). A critique of them on their own terms is both beyond my competence and beyond the scope of this paper.

27. Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, pp. 276ff; the thesis is elaborated in *La société de consommation*, Paris: S.G.P.P., 1970. The examples in the text are mine.

28. Their work is presented and discussed in a superb essay by Robert D'Amico, "Desire and the Commodity Form", *Telos*, no. 35, Spring, 1978. The quotation at the end of this paragraph is from p. 101.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 104. D'Amico objects to Baudrillard's reading of Marx. I think there is more truth in it than D'Amico is willing to concede, but it is certainly correct to say that Baudrillard ignores all the nuances in Marx's texts. The most adequate critique and interpretation of Marx on this point is, in my view, the one offered by Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, pp. 148-170.

30. In his essay, "Fétichisme et idéologie" (1970), reprinted in his *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, pp. 95-113; also the chapter "Au-delà de la valeur d'usage", *ibid.*, pp. 154-171. *Cf.* Kline and Leiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-13.

31. *Pour une critique*, p. 160 (my italics).

32. Marx, *Grundrisse*, tr. Martin Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1973, p. 881, quoted by Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, p. 151. Sahlins notes there the contrasting passage from pp. 267-268 of the *Grundrisse*, where Marx promises — but never subsequently fulfills the promise — to show how use value is a "determinant" of the "system of needs and production".

33. Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, pp. 207-208.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

35. W. D. Wells and A. D. Beard, "Personality and Consumer Behaviour", in S. Ward and T. S. Robertson, eds. *Consumer Behaviour: Theoretical Sources*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973, pp. 141-199. Table 3 in their article (pp. 180-189) lists a great number of these research efforts.

36. *Culture and Practical Reason*, p. 178.

37. A recent statement offers a good illustration: "Hence, true needs are those which foster the development of human universality, given the achieved level of material and intellectual resources; false needs those which blindly reproduce the irrational necessity of domination." Charles Rachlis, "Marcuse and the Problem of Happiness", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol 2, No. 1, Winter, 1978, p. 80.

38. I have benefited from a conversation with Herbert Marcuse on these matters. I hasten to add that the formulations in the text are entirely my own responsibility.

39. In his *Democratic Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 178-9, C. B. Macpherson accuses marginal utility theorists of "making the assumption of universal innate emulation, or innately insatiable wants," and he suggests that this is a regression to a "pre-Hobbesian" position. In primitive societies the propensity for emulation is generally restricted to adult males (thus is not universal) and is not related to any insatiability of wants. It is clearly a cultural practice, and thus not "innate" in the strict sense; one need not assume it is present in all human cultures, but also one cannot regard it as simply a product of capitalist market relations. Whether one views its modern form as inherently harmful or beneficial is of course a matter of judgement; in this essay I have not taken a stance on that issue, but merely called attention to its significance in an analytical sense.

40. This is developed in his forthcoming book, "An Obsured Alternative: Marx on Socialism and Communism". Professor Moore kindly allowed me to read his draft manuscript.

41. One valuable study is Philip Hanson, *Advertising and Socialism*, White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1974.