

Paying for water and the geography of commodities

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Across the globe there is an ongoing debate about whether water ought to be treated as a commodity. This paper argues that recent geographical work on commodities can usefully inform these debates amongst environmental and development policymakers. First, the paper uses a case study from Cameroon to show that the commodification of public water supplies is not new, permanent or inevitable. Second, it uses the case study and insights from the psychoanalytic literature to examine the relationship between the willingness-to-pay for water and knowledge amongst water users about the costs of production. It is argued that the commodity fetish remains a useful concept, but that it requires reinterpretation. It concludes that demystifying the commodity includes not only unveiling the politics of production but also understanding the politics of the practice of exchange by considering the socio-synthetic effects of treating things as commodities.

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The point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, the 'secret' of this form itself. (Žižek 1989, 11)

Introduction: a small town, a great debate and the new geography of commodities

In 1994 a crowd of women gathered in the small Cameroonian town of Tombel to protest against the gradual closure of public taps by the government water corporation. The corporation planned to replace these standpipes with water booths where local entrepreneurs would sell water by the bucket. At one protest four very old women marched naked, causing men to cower in their homes in fear.¹ At another the women marched to the office of the water engineers and threw down a variety of leaves associated with juju (magic) and then urinated on the doorstep of the building (*The Herald* 14 February 1994). In both demonstrations the women were

drawing on a long tradition of female militancy in Cameroon (Ardener 1975) that used sexual insults to play on male anxieties about impotence. Their challenge was directed not only at the men who produced the national policy of making them pay for water but also the engineers who implemented that policy and the local community leaders who were powerless to stop it (*The Post* 14 February 1994).

These contemporary interpretations of historic forms of protest were sufficient to terrify the water engineers. They abandoned the network that they had operated for 20 years, fled from the town and refused to return.² Since 1994 the town's water supply has been operated by members of the Tombel community. Though they have not privatized the public taps they do, nevertheless, collect money from consumers to run the system.³

When Ismail Serageldin (then vice-president of the World Bank) prophesied in 1995 that the wars of the twenty-first century would be over water, the opposition to the creeping commodification of water in towns as far apart as Grenoble, Manila, Cochabamba, Nelspruit, Accra and Tombel was

probably not what he had in mind. In the war of ideas around global water management the battle lines have, increasingly, been drawn around whether or not water ought to be treated as a commodity. The preamble of the European Water Framework Directive states that 'water is not a commercial product like any other but, rather a heritage which must be protected, defended and treated as such' (European Commission 2000), whilst Article 9 of the same directive obliges member states to try to move towards full cost pricing of water by 2010. This legal incoherence epitomizes a contradiction that is being worked out world-wide.

On one side of this argument there are those who claim that water is scarce and, like all scarce goods, it is best allocated through a market mechanism. Water must be turned into a commodity to be sold at the full price of its production, including environmental externalities, if it is to be efficiently and equitably distributed and conserved. Such a shift would be to the benefit of the poor because it would remove an existing subsidy system that only benefits the rich and because it would provide an incentive for private capital to invest in water infrastructure (Serageldin 1994 1995; Winpenny 1994; Lee 1999). On the other side are those who argue that water, though scarce, is in its essence not commercial and that such a process of commodification (whatever form it takes and whatever institution promulgates it) is little more than theft of a common good. Corporatizing public water providers, they suggest, has negative social and ecological consequences because it organizes access to water on the basis of capacity to pay and because it leaves power in the hands of distant and unaccountable institutions (Petrella 2001; Barlow and Clarke 2002; Shiva 2002). On both sides of this quarrel the key texts are excitingly passionate and urgent in tone and geographers have made valuable contributions to the debate (Bakker 2003 2004; Marvin and Laurie 1999; Swyngedouw 2004). The concepts of commodities and commodification are at the centre of contemporary global debates about water management.

Simultaneously, the same concepts have also re-emerged as a vehicle around which to produce geographical research. Prompted by a revived material culture in anthropology (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff 1990), a body of work has emerged, which could be labelled *the new geography of commodities* (Cook and Crang 1996; May 1996; Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Cook *et al.* 1999; Leslie and Reimer 1999; Hughes 2000

2001; Naylor 2000; Freidberg 2001; Le Heron and Hayward 2002; Smith *et al.* 2002). It is 'new', because in its sensitivity to culture it is distinct from an earlier more economic geography of commodities, which focused entirely on trade. Commodities have attracted this attention because they provide a tangible vehicle through which to empirically link abstract categories that have historically been epistemologically separated (Jackson 2002). The new geography of commodities is not a coherent approach built around a shared political or theoretical project. Rather it is a plural field in which the common ground is a shared interest in the movement of items of trade and their capacity to provide a commentary on social experience. This field has already been surveyed and discussed extensively (Watts 1999; Jackson 1999 2002; Castree 2001 2003 2004; Bridge and Smith 2003) and key examples of the genre have now been gathered together in a textbook (Hughes and Reimer 2004).

Some authors argue that this new research lacks the political traction of earlier commodity analyses based on the concept of unveiling the 'fetish' – the intellectual project of making visible the hidden injustices of commodity production by locating the appropriation of labour (Harvey 1996, 334–41; Hartwick 1998 2000; Johns and Vural 2000; Castree 2004). While it is true that contemporary commodity analysis is less certain about its political goals, it is a misrepresentation to suggest that it has entirely abandoned any ambition to politicize the human stories involved in commodity production (see, for example, Cook 2002; Miller 2003). Furthermore, the new geography of commodities engages with the observation that the process of producing concepts about commodities is, itself, political (Castree 2001). The idea that value in objects is exclusively linked to a producer, it is argued, may reflect a eurocentric over-privileging of labour (Miller 2003) that sweeps aside other parts of the story of social reproduction (Cook *et al.* 2004). In the anxiety to distance this more self-reflexive analysis from earlier metaphors of 'unveiling', however, a sense of the puzzle of commodities has been lost. The mystery is not what is hidden inside the commodity during the history of its production, rather the mystery is that we know that commodities have a history, but in order to make markets work we act as if they do not. Admittedly the character of this process of 'knowing' is ambiguous because such a history is only a mental image from the perspective of a potential consumer. What is meant by the

phrase 'we know' is not simple, but the main claim being made here is that even though the materiality of commodities makes their history visible, nevertheless an implicit agreement is generally reached within markets not to let that history interfere with the present operation of exchange.

Water is different from many of the objects that the geographical literature on commodities has considered in recent years. First, unlike tropical fruit, furniture or cut flowers, it doesn't tend to move very far between production and consumption. Because water is heavy and bulky it is expensive to transport and engineers try to minimize the distance between the source and the water-user. So, unlike previous geographical work on commodities, the aim here is to look at one particular material thing in one place over a long period of time, rather than follow something across large spaces in a short period of time (which is the formula used in the analysis of commodity chains). Second, though the capitalist state may be involved in the production of flowers through incentives, taxes and regulations, it is far more closely embroiled in the production of water, which is considered a basic necessity and a key element of national infrastructure. Third, water supply is often categorized as a service, rather than a good. This implies that it is not the *water* for which a consumer pays but the *delivery* of the water to the home. The significance of this distinction is overstated, but nevertheless it is often articulated. Finally, unlike items of furniture say, which have a discrete quality, water is continuous. When this paper describes water as having been de-commodified it does not refer to a particular item or quantity of water, so much as water in general in a particular place. Despite these differences, there is much that analysts of global water policy can learn from the geographical discussion of commodification.

The primary claim of recent geographical research is that there is more to the life of goods than their role in capital accumulation. If a commodity is an object that is bought and sold with money then commodities are just 'one phase in the life of some things' (Appadurai 1986, 17). If commodification is the process during which a thing that previously circulated outside monetary exchange is brought into the nexus of a market driven by the accumulation of capital, then it may equally leave that nexus as well. Commodification is transient and reversible. It is the stories around and beyond the commodity phase that are often

still to be collected and which should not and cannot be neatly excised from any analysis. Commodities 'embody emotional value in the meanings and attachments bestowed upon them by cognizant consumers' (Bridge and Smith 2003, 258).

Regardless of whether a writer supports or opposes the introduction of a market in water supply, the global policy debate (as framed by key international meetings at Marrakech 1997, The Hague 2000 and Kyoto 2003) tends to employ a unilinear and economic conception of commodification, which implies a singular, momentous, irreversible and universal transformation of water (from a non-commodity produced for its use-value into a commodity produced for its exchange-value). Such a position has been challenged by a few writers on water (Castro 2004; Hall and Lobina 2004; Kazimbaya-Senkwe 2004), who, like geographers working on other goods, argue that commodification can be both transient and partial. To further illustrate this claim, the next section of this paper identifies different commodity phases in the life of water in a small town in Cameroon. The paper then goes on to examine the relationship between a water-user's willingness to pay for water and their knowledge of the production process and the implications this has for the concept of the commodity fetish.

The commodity biography of water in twentieth-century Tombel

In crude summary, water in Tombel first became a commodity in the 1940s. It was partially de-commodified in the 1960s, was re-commodified in the 1980s and de-commodified again in the 1990s. This section of the paper expands this narrative and links it to political and economic change in the town to explain why it is socially acceptable to buy water at one point in time and not at another. To paraphrase James Ferguson (1988, 492) it asks: under what circumstances, and at what points in its biography is water in Tombel incorporated into cash exchange? This cyclical process matters to current policy debates first because it shows that there is nothing new about the commodification process in Africa, second because it shows the significance of political and economic context when unravelling debates over paying for water and third because it shows that this process is not one-directional.

Tombel is a town of around 15 000 people in Bakossi-land in the Southwest Province of Cameroon.

Its initial growth in the 1920s was based on its position near what was (until 1961) an international border (between British Southern Cameroons and French *Cameroun*). Bakossi people lived on both sides of this divide and the town was a focus for cross-border trade. In 1927 a British agricultural officer encouraged cocoa growing in the area for the first time since German experiments in 1906 (Clarence-Smith 1988, 500; DeLancey 1988, 306). The Bakossi Co-operative society astutely identified an opportunity and quickly switched to cocoa production, taking full advantage of the 'hands-off' character of British colonial government.⁴ When the French also began exporting coffee, the Bakossi responded by planting coffee in considerable quantities, which was also sold through Tombel. By the mid 1930s, cocoa and coffee were well established and Tombel became the most significant settlement in the area (Ejedepang-Koge 1971).

From the late 1930s Tombel underwent a period of social transformation as labour migrants from other ethnic groups were attracted to the town. In the global post-war cocoa boom, production increased and so did profits, but because there were very few commodities available for people in Tombel to buy there was a period of under-consumption (Levin 1980, 229). The Bakossi leased out their farms to sharecroppers and by 1944 the town's population was estimated at 2300 people.⁵ Later, when money was in shorter supply, the Bakossi mortgaged their land to their own tenants and as a result many 'strangers' gained ownership of land in Tombel. This increasing ethnic diversity was not socially unproblematic (DeLancey and Mokeba 1990, 194), but the context in which subsequent struggles for water developed drew on a cosmopolitan set of cultural values.

Tombel suffered from serious water shortages during the dry season (December to March). In 1947 the local District Officer (DO) informed his superiors that 'Tombel is rapidly becoming the largest trading centre in the Division and unfortunately it is the one area . . . which suffers from a lack of adequate water supply.'⁶ The only source of piped water was in a private plantation about a mile out of town. When this was not available Tombel residents had to trek to a spring at Wawa, five miles to the east, inside French territory.

The combination of profitable cocoa and water shortages produced a dynamic market for water in Tombel during the 1940s. Young men head-loaded water from Wawa in four gallon tins⁷ and then sold

it at a rate of 3d. or 4d. per gallon (or 9d. for a four gallon tin) in the Tombel market place.⁸ In accordance with the social norms of both the Bakossi and the 'strangers', small quantities of water could be demanded from the water traders for free, but in general it was socially unproblematic to sell water.

In 1947 British officials drew up a scheme to pipe water from a spring source to Tombel. The infrastructure would cost around £5,000, which would be recovered in water rates over 10 years.⁹ The DO proposed an annual rate of 6/- per taxpayer, but other officials argued that it was fairer to build a water booth with a turnstile and sell water at a rate of 1/2d./quart.¹⁰ The people of Tombel were consulted (through their Native Authority – the institution of indirect rule) and expressed a preference to pay the Government an annual water rate as part of their taxes.¹¹ However, the system was not actually constructed until 1963.

The water market continued in Tombel for two decades, but whereas it had been unproblematic in the late 1940s, by the 1960s it had become a significant economic burden on households in Tombel. The cocoa boom was over. Incomes had fallen and an American engineer reporting on Cameroonian water supplies estimated that for some families the daily cost of water in Tombel was more than 50 per cent of their daily income.¹²

In 1963 a pipe network was introduced across town for the first time and water was partially decommodified. The market for tins of water from Wawa was eliminated. However, this shift was only partial, since the completion of the system was accompanied by the introduction of water rates to Tombel. Whereas previously households had purchased water from entrepreneurs in the market, they now paid for a service from the Government of West Cameroon. Whereas previously the transaction entailed a profit motive, the government aimed only to cover the costs of supply. The British colonial state had been charging water rates since 1923, and the post-independence government adopted their laws. In Tombel most households would have paid 420 CFA francs¹³ per year for water in 1963 as a supplement to their 2000 CFA annual poll tax. The local council collected the rate on behalf of the central government, for which they received 35 CFA commission.¹⁴

So was water still embedded in the cash nexus in 1963? Yes. Was it an economic good exchanged in an open market? No. Was water produced for profit? Not officially, since the government's aim

was that water systems ought to be financially self-sufficient.¹⁵ However, throughout the 1960s and 1970s it was claimed that local council officials were harvesting tax revenues for personal gain.¹⁶ A government inspection of Tombel Council in 1965 concluded that the water rate was not reaching the central treasury.¹⁷ In response local councillors maintained that they were deliberately withholding the water rates from the central government because the quality of the service they provided was so poor. The money, they claimed, was used to employ local labourers to operate the water supply.¹⁸ Officially Cameroonian citizens received water supplies from the central government in exchange for taxes. Actually the consumers paid those taxes, which were probably taken by local politicians and partially used to operate the water systems. The willingness of Tombel residents to pay water rates declined steadily during the 1970s.

In 1984 the institutional regime in which the Tombel water supply operated changed dramatically. The government department that had officially operated the system for the previous 20 years was replaced by a parastatal corporation called the Société Nationale des Eaux du Cameroun (SNEC). Though this body was largely owned by the Government of Cameroon and the French Government's Development Fund, it was meant to operate like an independent private enterprise. By 1990 SNEC operated water supplies in over 100 towns in Cameroon. SNEC was corporate in its outlook and made revenue collection a high priority. Computerized bills and water meters were introduced for both private homes and also public taps (the bills for public taps were sent to the Town Council). There was also an active programme of disconnections for those who defaulted on their bills.¹⁹ The price of domestic water rose dramatically (Table I) at this time.

Table I The national water price rises 1975–1982

Date	Price of domestic water (FCFA/m ³)
1963–1970	7.7
1971	30–70.5
1980	72.5
1982 (January)	129
1982 (April)	225

1963–1970 figure: BNA File No. Rd (1961)2, Holloway Report BNA File No. Rd (1961)3. 1971 figure: BNA File No. Rd (1965)2. Other figures: *Cameroon Tribune* 13 January 1982, *Cameroon Tribune* 18 August 1982

At the same time as the financial regime changed, so did the infrastructure. A new pipe network was laid in Tombel, chemical water treatment was introduced, a large system of slow sand filters was constructed and 24 new public taps were built.²⁰ The construction was paid for using money loaned to the Cameroonian Government by the World Bank. The Cameroonian economy had switched from a dependence on agro-industrial exports to a dependence on oil exports in the late 1970s. It was anticipated that this income from oil would form the basis of repaying the Government's borrowing. This reconfiguration of the network set out to physically transform water by visibly asserting its produced nature in a chemical and bacteriological sense on the one hand, and its measurability on the other. These changes were central to an attempt to make water more like a 'normal' commodity.

The idea that SNEC was using water to make a profit became commonplace in the 1980s. Officially, however, SNEC rarely declared a profit. In Tombel SNEC always maintained that operation costs exceeded revenues.²¹ The failure to make a profit, however, has to be placed in context. SNEC was one of several cash-generating parastatals whose income is widely assumed to have flowed to the political centre of the nation. SNEC, it is supposed, was a source of capital for the governing party and the national elite. If the revenue that accrued from supplying water in the 1970s had been appropriated by local politicians, it was now being harvested by national politicians.

One of the key consequences of the corporatization of water in Tombel was the closure of public taps. SNEC sent the bill for the public taps to the local council. In 1984 this bill was about 12 million CFA, which represented 27 per cent of the council's total annual budget (*Cameroon Tribune* 17 August 1984). The council frequently defaulted and by the early 1990s they had accumulated a debt to SNEC of 113 million CFA (*The Herald Newspaper* 25 May 1998). So SNEC began to close the public taps. When this strategy became politically impossible they proposed privatizing each public tap by handing the taps over to individual entrepreneurs, who would sell water to consumers by the bucketful. It was this policy that led to the protests by the women of Tombel, which in turn led to the expulsion of SNEC from the town in 1994 and the subsequent operation of the network by a community committee.

Table II Tombel community water supply: income and expenditure 1998–1999

<i>Income during year</i>	<i>FCFA</i>
Flat rate levy on householders ^a	3 624 850
New connection fees	835 400
Cash balance from previous year	264 000
Total annual income	4 724 250
Expenditure during year	
Salaries	1 406 450
Maintenance and equipment	779 350
Renovation of office	514 100
Stationery and other office expenses	424 150
Miscellaneous ^b	327 281
Compensation for board members	246 750
Research trip to other community run water supplies	237 000
Total annual expenditure	3 935 081
Balance for 1998–1999	789 169

^aThe flat rate for new connections is 30 000 FCFA

^bTraditional sacrifices made during the legalization process form the bulk of the miscellaneous category 1963–1970 figure: BNA File No. Rd (1961)2, Holloway Report BNA File No. Rd (1961)3. 1971 figure: BNA File No. Rd (1965)2. Other figures: *Cameroon Tribune* 13 January 1982, *Cameroon Tribune* 18 August 1982

So, was water decommodified when the community wrested control of the network from SNEC in 1994? The water meters installed by SNEC were all removed and instead the community charged a flat rate (about US\$2/year) for all households that have water inside their homes. In order to save money the chemical treatment works and the slow sand filters were abandoned and the number of maintenance staff was reduced.

Those people who collect water from public taps are not charged at all, but most public taps are still closed. The Tombel Community Water Committee only just breaks even (Table II). The Committee has discussed bringing back metering (as a means of controlling wastage of water and locating undeclared connections), but they say that those households with water in their homes (who are the highest volumetric users) actively propagate the view that water is a 'free gift from God' and try to manipulate popular opinion in Tombel in order to protect their own interests.²² So, whilst the most obvious symbols of commodified water – meters and an operator oriented towards cost recovery – have gone, the politics of water in Tombel remain centred around questions of finance.

The original question asked when are the moments in the biography of water in Tombel at

which it is incorporated into cash exchange? The answer set out above suggests that water has in some respects been an economic good continuously since the 1940s. Yet the organization of that exchange process has varied considerably in concert with other changes in Tombel, changes that have subsequently shaped the physical infrastructure of the water supply network and the institutional arrangements of basic service provision. Not only is the lesson of the new geography of commodities that there is no single momentous shift from non-commodity to commodity, but there is, in addition, the suggestion that there are endless other narratives that could be traced through the biography of Tombel's water. Stories about changes in religious belief (Balz 1995; Ejedepang-Koge 1996) or the evolution of nationalism, for example, could easily be woven into this account. Indeed they need to be incorporated to fully understand why the people of Tombel have such a strong sense of ownership of the water infrastructure. An overly tight focus on the commodity status of water, which excises these other stories, can never fully capture the politics of water.

The engineers and politicians who now manage water supplies in Cameroon claim that most consumers are reluctant to pay for their water because they are ignorant; their attitudes need to be modernized. In particular, it is suggested that consumers do not understand how much it costs to build and operate water infrastructure; they need to be persuaded to pay by educating them about the costs of production. The first part of the paper has suggested that the story of payment and non-payment is far more dynamic than such an analysis suggests. However, this concern with consumers' knowledge about costs also raises a new question. What is the relationship between knowing about the history of water production and being willing to pay for it? The next section of the paper challenges the assumption that the people of Tombel do not understand that there is a cost attached to the production of water, and analyses what consumers know, how they act and how the commodity form works.

Objet petit (e)autre: knowledge, practice and the commodity fetish

As the taste of the porridge does not tell you who grew the oats, no more does this simple process tell you of itself what are the social conditions under which it is

taking place, whether under the slave-owner's brutal lash, or the anxious eye of the capitalist. (Marx 1992 [1887], 112)

In the 1970s, when Ministers in the Government of Cameroon were trying to raise capital from overseas, they learnt that lenders only considered loaning them money for infrastructure investment if the existing utilities were financially self-sufficient.²³ Yet in places like Tombel the water system did not cover its costs because the public were unwilling to pay their water rates. The obstacle, they concluded, was the prevailing social attitude towards water. To bowdlerize Marx, you can't tell from the taste of the water you drink how much it cost the government to produce it for you. As a Minister said in 1971,

the notion that water is, or should be, free lingers on. This misconception must be removed. It has to be emphasised that although the water is free to collect in its natural state at the source, the modern piped water supply system involves capital expenditure running into millions of francs which must be met by the consumers to whom the service is provided.²⁴

The implication is that there is a vestigial belief that water ought to be free, and water users need to be disabused of this delusion. This project of 'educating' consumers has continued for the last three decades with regular pleas from politicians and poster campaigns run by the water authority.

Thinking about the relationship between knowledge and willingness-to-pay in this way is unconvincing. Convincing consumers to pay for water is not just a question of revealing the costs of the water they are drinking. First, as the history of commodification in Tombel shows, the idea that water ought to be free was not an attitude that 'lingered on', but a belief that was actively produced. In the 1940s it was socially acceptable to buy water in the market, but by the 1970s it was socially unacceptable to pay for water delivered by the government through a pipe and paid for via the local council. The idea that water ought to be free was something that emerged over time.

Second, in a small-town like Tombel, everyone knows where the water comes from and who works to maintain the system. The 1963 water system was constructed using voluntary community labour, so there are still many people in town today who know where the pipes were laid, because they were the ones who laid them. There is extensive local technical knowledge about how the

infrastructure works and where it is located. In this respect the particular characteristics of water come once more to the fore. The question 'who produces water?' is apparently a vexed one (when compared, for example, to production processes in farms or factories), yet the knowledge of the spring source itself and the history of the infrastructure is widespread within a town like Tombel. Asking 'who made the water in Tombel?' is a perfectly rational question, which would probably produce the answer 'the community'.

Third, knowledge about the production of water is malleable; it can be manipulated for strategic purposes. For example, in 1994 Tombel residents argued that prior to 1982 (when SNEC came into town) water had always been free in their town. However, the archival record shows that residents had paid either through water rates (in the 1960s) or in an open market (in the 1940s and 1950s). Claiming that water had been free helped to justify seizing the infrastructure from the state. There is a struggle over knowledge about the history of water supplies (Page 2003).

The project of educating consumers appears similar to the familiar academic exercise of 'unveiling' the commodity fetish because it places so much emphasis on drawing attention to the hidden costs of production, revealing the investments of capital and labour fixed in the network. The commodity fetish suggests that within capitalism 'commodities become detached from their origins in labour' (Miller 2003, 361). It usually entails making known that which the commodity hides; it is 'an injunction to re-cognise' social relations (Castree 2001, 1521).

Like much of the literature on the commodity fetish, however, the project of educating water consumers about production costs sees that process of uncovering the content of the commodity as the final goal of the analysis. It fails to go on to understand that there is something particular about the category of objects known as commodities. The question is not only 'who what and where are crystallised in commodity bodies?' (Castree 2001, 1522), but also why is it that work can 'affirm its social character only in the commodity form of its product?' (Žižek 1989, 11).

Around the same time that Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff were eviscerating the Marxist treatment of commodity fetishism as reductive and patronizing, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek began using Freud and Lacan to argue that Marx's notion of commodity fetishism was still shocking (Žižek 1989,

11–53). In general, psychoanalytic theory has relatively little interest in material objects (Miller 1998). However, Žižek claimed that Marx's treatment of the commodity fetish was structurally similar to Freud's analysis of dreams; both entailed a two-stage interpretive procedure. Neither Marx nor Freud, he claims, aim to merely unveil the hidden 'content' of the object they were studying. Rather, what they hoped to achieve was to go on and use the 'form' of the object of study as a means of understanding the unconscious.

Freud's analysis first involved getting beyond the 'manifest content' (the narrative) of a dream in order to unveil its 'latent content' (its significance). The latent content is usually something the dreamer is quite conscious of; it is a 'normal' thought, which can be easily expressed in common language because it is something we are anxious about. What is less tangible is the third element, the unconscious desire of the dreamer, which cannot be expressed in everyday language. This articulates itself only through the process (labelled 'dream-work') of disguising the latent content by translating it into the thing we call a dream. The 'secret' of the dream which needs to be understood is not the latent content itself but the way in which that latent content is drawn into the unconscious, the mechanisms which give it the *form* of a dream. 'Dream-work' is as near as it is possible to get to expressing the inexpressible – unconscious desire. So whilst segregating the manifest content from the latent content is vital to getting beyond the image of a dream as the chaotic interplay of meaning and nonsense (perhaps governed by a mysterious 'hidden hand'), it is only a preparatory step to also understanding 'dream-work'.

Similarly, Marx's analysis first involved getting beyond 'price' (the narrative) of a commodity in order to unveil 'labour-time' (its significance). Labour-time or 'value' is usually something a participant in market exchange is quite conscious of; it is a 'normal' experience, which can be easily expressed in common language because most consumers are also producers. What is less tangible is the third element, the mystical quality of a commodity, which cannot be expressed in everyday language. This articulates itself through a process (labelled 'real abstraction') of disguising labour-time by translating it into the thing we call a commodity. The 'secret' of the commodity which needs to be understood is not the labour-time itself but the way in which labour-time is drawn into the

mystery of commodity exchange, the mechanisms which give it the *form* of a commodity. 'Real abstraction' is as near as it is possible to get to expressing the inexpressible – the metaphysical subtleties of the commodity. So whilst segregating the price of a commodity from the labour-time it embodies is vital to getting beyond the image of exchange as the chaotic interplay of supply and demand (perhaps governed by the mysterious 'hidden hand' of the market), it is only a preparatory step to also understanding 'real abstraction'.

Žižek swaps Marx's language (metaphysical, theological, mystical, transcendent) for that of Freud (unconscious desire, symptom) and makes the comparison even more explicit when he talks of the unconscious of the commodity. This displacement of the unconscious from the human subject to the commodity itself is characteristic of the Lacanian contribution to psychoanalytic thought. Lacan claimed that whilst the personality may be forged through relationships with other subjects, the self is experienced in terms of relationships with objects (Žižek 1997, 8; Schroeder 2004). For example, as part of the blurring of the relationship between people and things, emotional work can be displaced onto things. Tibetan prayer wheels do the praying while freeing people up to continue their everyday activities; the dubbed audience track on a TV sitcom enables people to relax and unwind without the burden of having to laugh at the jokes. For Žižek this displacement of consciousness onto commodities is part of the historical process of the transition from feudalism (when relations between masters and servants were mystified by ideological beliefs) to capitalism (when relations between people are demystified, but relations with things appear to become mysterious). The focus of study becomes 'real abstraction' – the closest it is possible to get to the unconscious of the commodity.

The concept of real abstraction is taken from Sohn-Rethel (1978), who argued that the abstraction involved in an act of commodity exchange is not thought, but has the form of thought. Žižek extends this concept in order to link the Marxist analysis of commodity exchange to the Lacanian conception of the 'Real'. For Lacan the terms Imaginary, Symbolic and Real are key. Unlike the more familiar Freudian id, ego and super-ego they are 'not mental forces, personifiable on the model-builder's inner stage, but *orders* each of which serves to position the individual within a force-field that traverses him' (Bowie 1991, 91). The

register of the Lacanian Real, which has been one of the central themes of Žižek's writing for many years (Žižek 2005), remains distinctly ineffable, invariably defined in terms of what it is not, and yet invested with the motive power to prevent any settled balance between the Imaginary (the conscious, delusional attempt by the subject to remove themselves from the flux of subjects and to see their own self as a coherent whole) and the Symbolic (the intersubjective realm of language, sexuality and law). As such Žižek argues that real abstraction – the nearest it is possible to get to the unconscious of the commodity form – stands outside of everyday language, precedes normal thought and cannot be commanded at will.

Žižek's claim that real abstraction is external and anterior to thought appears to be typically inscrutable, but consider the basic act of exchange. The formation of 'exchange-value' is an abstraction from the specific qualities of different commodities in order to equate one commodity with another so that the market can operate. But *before* the thinking subject ever consciously conceptualized abstraction, abstraction must already have been operating because markets worked. Consumers have to understand abstraction before they can participate in exchange; they know it, but they have never thought about it. Similarly before philosophy ever identified the atomized individual subject, that subject was already assembled for the purpose of commodity exchange. So this process of commodity exchange appears to have been produced on some other scene; it appears to realize itself *outside* of thought. Lacan coined the term *extimate* to describe the sense that the elements subjects feel are most internal to their own selves (their conscience, their sexuality), are also necessarily external, because they are all produced through the intersubjective relationships of the Symbolic order (Žižek 1997, 45).

The general form of the commodity is the nearest it is possible to get to an expression of real abstraction, just as the form of dreams is the nearest it is possible to get to dream-work. It is an *objet petit autre*, a thing that functions as (lower case) other but can be substituted for the (upper case) Other. When an infant rolls a toy away, they cry. If they then retrieve the toy, they laugh. They experience loss and recovery of the toy. That toy is an *objet petit a* because it is through the toy that the child experiences the idea of loss – the big 'O' Other (Evans 1996). The commodity is an *objet petit a*

because it is through commodities that we experience the idea of real abstraction.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire is a subject's wish for wholeness. But in order to be a subject it is necessary to engage with other subjects, acknowledge the extimate and sacrifice wholeness by entering the symbolic order of language, sexuality and law. The subject's pursuit of desire is, therefore, necessarily frustrated. Nevertheless, the desire is still felt. Retrospectively the subject reasons that there must be some *thing* that is missing, something that causes our desire, which, if found, would satisfy desire. 'If she obtained this "thing" she would no longer desire. Therefore she searches for this mysterious object that can serve as the cause of her desire' (Schroeder 2000, 40). The *objet petit a* is this evasive object-cause of desire.

Spatially *a* is an object whose proper contours are discernible only if we glance at it askance; it is for ever indiscernible to the straightforward look. Temporally it is an object which exists only *qua* anticipated or lost, only in the modality of not-yet or not-anymore, never in the 'now' of a pure, undivided present. (Žižek 1999, 241)

The *objet petit a* is not the cause of desire, but we act as though it must be the cause of our desire. In this way intersubjective relationships are experienced through relationships with objects.

The real abstraction that takes place during commodity exchange binds subjects together by knowingly misrecognizing the wider social network that underpins market exchange. When a consumer comes to a market they focus on the commodity itself (the cleanliness of the water, its price, the container it is in) and decide not to recognize that when water takes the form of a commodity it is an effect of a wider network of relations. 'A shared lie is an incomparably more effective bond for a group than the truth' (Žižek 1999, 99). Market participants *act* as if we do not *know* that the commodity money is a reified form of social relations, even though we *know* that we do *know* it.

From a psychoanalytical perspective there is more to this than just uncovering the social relations that have been reified. There is a search also for the immaterial virtual order that lies beyond an explanation of production, but which directs it. Money is made of materials that will ultimately be destroyed (paper, metal), yet we act as if money were indestructible. Our practice of exchange suggests that even when those coins are destroyed in a national treasury something somewhere will

continue to exist. Our actions suggest that money has a body beyond its material body – a ‘sublime materiality’. This is sustained by the Symbolic Order, for example the authority who issues the coin (the Banque des Etats de l’Afrique Centrale in Cameroon) and the symbols on the coin (the words ‘100 francs’). Money works, but this is not a function of the properties of the stuff that money is made from, rather it is a consequence of the place money occupies within a network of social relations. The objects used for money have no value outside the right social network, as the contemporary uselessness of the pre-colonial Cameroonian brass currency shows. Understanding this socio-synthetic quality of exchange is key to the political project of understanding the form of commodities.

Since the community took over the operation of the water supply in Tombel they have continued to demand payment for water on a monthly basis. People still say that water should be free, but nevertheless they pay the flat-rate levy. The residents of Tombel clearly know that there is a cost involved in producing water and that if they want to receive water they need to contribute. They do not object to paying for water; they object to paying for water in a way that bound them into a particular social relationship between the political elite in Cameroon and their town. By the act of participating in an exchange process administered by the community, regardless of their words about water, they are binding themselves together and separating themselves from the wider state.

Consumers involved in commodity exchange indulge in the fantasy that they are atomized individuals because of their desire to be whole subjects. We take no note of the role that our act of exchange plays in bringing society together in a certain way. When an individual householder walks to the community water office in Tombel and pays their bill, they are buying their month’s water and they are also reproducing the current social relationship between this town and the state and in Cameroon. By buying water from the community water committee they are refusing to participate in a national body (SNEC) that has the capacity to administer inter-regional subsidies, thereby participating in the splintering of the Cameroonian nation and revealing that nation to be a delusion. They appear to be acting as atomized individuals, but they are actually doing something very social. They are asserting their preference for a local scale of politics over a national scale of politics. The act or

practice of buying water in Tombel appears to have special powers to reproduce a particular social relationship. The lesson for water managers is that consumers know more than is assumed, and drawing their attention to the costs of production is unlikely to persuade them to be more willing to pay for water supplies.

Conclusion

In 1998, the World Bank predicted future revenues for the global private water sector of US\$800 billion a year. At the World Water Forum in The Hague in 2000, it was agreed that water was a human need not a human right, and could therefore be sold for a profit. In Article 31 (iii) of the agreement that emerged from the Ministerial meeting of the WTO in Doha in November 2001, it was agreed to allow members the option to lift trade barriers on environmental goods and services. And at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002, it was made clear that the private sector was to be a key partner in the implementation of the commitment to halve the number of people without safe access to water. In Cameroon there is an active attempt to rhetorically redefine water as an economic good using the slogan ‘Potable water is a scarce commodity: don’t waste it.’

But over the same period a counter-tendency has emerged. Water companies are showing less interest in large parts of the non-West. They are generally finding it harder to raise capital to pursue contracts and some are retreating from the contracts that they have already won. The recent water privatizations in Africa are now sufficiently well established to be judged on their record and the results suggest that their achievements are, at best, modest (Bayliss 2002; Berthélemy 2003). Political alliances, often capitalizing on a populist nationalism, are developing at a variety of scales to oppose private-sector participation. They are finding considerable public support and are beginning to influence the major policy meetings such as that in Kyoto in March 2003.

It is imperative that more capital should be fixed in the form of pipes, taps and reservoirs in the developing world, but there is good reason to be sceptical of the claim that a single policy of commodifying water is likely to provide a universal solution to a diverse set of very particular demands. Looking at the global water policy debate from the

perspective of the new geography of commodities suggests that existing conceptions of the central ideas of the debate are too narrow.

Commodification is not a new process in the water sector, and it is not a one-directional process either. It has been going on in Cameroon for over 80 years. Water was, in some ways, a commodity throughout the twentieth century, but this was never a sufficient framework to capture all its meanings. Water is part of a wide set of stories and its commodity narrative cannot be understood in isolation. Water in Tombel has occupied a central place not only in cosmological storytelling and indigenous engineering, but also in colonial and post-colonial politics. It is a symbol of colonial incompetence and local pride. In the 1990s it has become a symbol of women's militancy and government greed. As it weaves its way through history, water has added to its meanings.

Current policy suggests that a combination of education and improved services will transform attitudes to water and that past politics will swiftly be forgotten. But technological leaps forward in the past have not erased the history of the Tombel water supply and consumers know more than such a strategy assumes.

A scepticism about the likely effectiveness of a policy of trying to treat water as an economic good needs to be distinguished from an automatic disdain for commodification, which is often associated with 'moral outrage and blanket disapproval' (Jackson 1999, 96). Such a response is often too simple. To take the final episode in the story of Tombel's water, for example, it would be easy to laud the expulsion of SNEC and the evolution of a community-based water supply as the heroic endeavour of local people to escape from the shackles of a corrupt and acquisitive parastatal corporation, to turn the tide against a venal process of commodification. In part such an analysis is plausible: the ruthless pursuit of a policy of cost recovery by SNEC is hard to defend in the context of widespread poverty, particularly since the capital generated was probably siphoned off to prop up the central Government of Cameroon. By withdrawing from the national water structure the Tombel community introduces a more transparent institution which is directly answerable to consumers, sets prices at a level that can be tolerated within the local economy and sets service standards at a level that is deemed suitable according to local needs. But there are numerous ways in which it is possible

to critique this current episode of decommodification too. Under community management there is no chemical water treatment, an inequitable flat rate levy is used, an unaccountable local elite can manipulate the water committee and there is little scope for future expansion because there are huge difficulties raising investment capital. In addition there is a self-serving parochialism in withdrawing from a national corporation, which undermines attempts to provide water in more arid parts of Cameroon at a reasonable price through regional cross-subsidy. Much of the development literature on water supply valorizes communities (Tayong 2001; Njoh 2003) and implicitly demonizes capitalist firms and the capitalist state. But in an age of flexible governance arrangements, this is too simple; there is no reason why partnerships between firms, governments and communities could not provide the driving force behind commodification (Page 2003).

It is politically lame, however, just to conclude that commodification is morally complex. Noel Castree acknowledges that simple normative judgements are rarely possible, but calls for academic geographers to offer substantive answers about the '“rightness”/“wrongness” of certain kinds of commodification/ization of certain things in certain situations' (2004, 32). In this case study there can be little doubt that eliminating the water market of the 1940s and 1950s by introducing a piped water supply paid for through water rates was progressive. In addition, the current community-run system, which sustains a welfare safety-net for those individuals who cannot afford to bring water into their homes, is more just than the plan to coerce everyone into paying. But after these points have been made, other judgements are less certain. There is always going to be a cost connected to supplying water, so the question is not really 'should water users pay for their water?' but 'how should water users pay for their water and how will the bill be divided?' The ongoing privatization of the water supply in Cameroon will mean that the profits (or losses) made by the shareholders of the global water companies will be connected to the costs of water paid by consumers in Cameroon. The local character of water supply will take on a global dimension and so these questions about the fair division of costs should engage the members of pension funds as well as the members of communities such as Tombel. Making such connections demonstrates the lasting political value of the commodity fetish.

Standard analysis of the commodity fetish sets out to lay bare the process of production, but this is only a first step. The really effective trick of the commodity fetish is to suggest that it is enough to stop at this point, to conclude that by unveiling the mystery of the content of the commodity then the mystery of the commodity has been dispensed with. The renewed critique offered to an analyst who has 'unveiled' the fetish through this Lacanian lens is

you may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations . . . but this is not how things really seem to you. In your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers. (Žižek 2002, 11–12)

The illusion of the commodity fetish works because the critic thinks that since they have unmasked the illusion of the commodity's content they have identified a clear political programme on which action can be taken, along the lines of fair trade or ethical trade, for example.

But the political cynic is ready to point out that even though we know the damage that carbon dioxide emissions do, we still get on planes to cross the globe to carry out research on sustainability and even though we know that political leaders make facts and laws to fit their military ambitions we re-elect them and allow our media to 'move on'. Why then should we expect that knowing about unfair or unethical trade is likely to change behaviour? Earlier readings of ideology and the commodity fetish rested on the assumption that subaltern subjects were ignorant of the consequences of their actions. Current readings of ideology suggest that in an age saturated with images, subjects know perfectly well the consequences of their actions, but they still act anyway. This is why it is so important to diversify the analysis of commodities to include the politics of the practice of exchange as well as the politics of production. 'The postmodern transparency of the process of production is false in so far as it obfuscates the immaterial virtual order which effectively runs the show' (Žižek 1997, 103).

Notes

- 1 The empirical material in this paper is derived either from a series of interviews carried out in Cameroon in 1998, 1999 and 2003 or from the Cameroon National

- Archives in Buea (BNA), which holds papers from the British colonial period (1916–1960) and post-colonial newspapers. The research was funded by the ESRC.
- 2 Interview Mr Epote, Buea, 20 April 1999. Interview Mr Sone, Buea, 22 April 1999. Interview Mr Ejedepang-Koge, Tombel, 26 April 1999.
 - 3 Interview with Tombel Community Water Committee Manager Mr Ewane Anthony Epolle, 24 April 1999.
 - 4 Chief Ntoko Epie defended the establishment of the African cocoa farms on what was nominally state land around Tombel as a means of generating the cash with which to pay taxes to the British. Ejedepang-Koge, S. (n.d.) 'Tradition and change in peasant activities' (Yaoundé) BNA open shelves.
 - 5 BNA Se 1944(5) 'Development water supplies'.
 - 6 DO Kumba (Newington) to Resident Buea (Harris) 1945 BNA File No. Se 1944(5) 'Development water supplies'.
 - 7 DO Kumba (Newington) to Resident Buea, March 1947 BNA File No. Se 1944(5) 'Development water supplies'.
 - 8 Resident, Buea (Harris) Minute 1944, BNA File No. Se 1944(5) 'Development water supplies'.
 - 9 DO Kumba (Newington) to Resident Buea, March 1947 BNA File No. Rd (1948)1 'Tombel water supply'.
 - 10 BNA File No. Se 1944(5) 'Development water supplies'.
 - 11 Resident Buea (Baker) to Secretary Eastern Provinces Enugu, November 1947, BNA File No. Rd (1948)1 'Tombel water supply'.
 - 12 DO Kumba (Newington) to Resident Buea (Harris), 1945 BNA File No. Se 1944(5) 'Development water supplies', BNA File No. Rd (1961)3 'Urban water supplies'.
 - 13 The currency in Cameroon is the franc de la Coopération Financière Africaine (CFA franc) which it shares with Chad, C.A.R., Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Together these countries make up the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), which is one of two blocs of African states whose currencies are tied to the French franc. The CFA Franc was introduced to West Cameroon on 2 April 1962 when it replaced the Nigerian pound. It was pegged to the French Franc at a rate of 50 FCFA = 1 French Franc. The FCFA in central Africa was devalued in 1994 so that 100 FCFA now = 1 French Franc. The value of the CFA franc is now fixed against all 11 euro-zone country currencies. Since the CFA100 = FF1 exchange rate has remained unchanged, the CFA franc-euro exchange rate is CFA665.957 = EURO1.
 - 14 BNA File No. Rd (1961)2.
 - 15 Acting Perm. Sec. Ministry of Works and Transport, January 1961, BNA File No. Rd (1958)2.
 - 16 Perm. Sec. Ministry Works and Transport (Goodson) to Director P.W.D. (Ndumu) and reply January 1963, BNA File No. Rd (1961)2.
 - 17 Notes on a tour of inspection by JH Mbu – Water Rating Officer, August 1965, BNA File No. Rd (1964)2.

- 18 Cameroon Outlook, 3 November, 1969.
- 19 SNEC (M. Dalmais, George) to Prime Minister West Cameroon, May 1972. BNA File No. Rd (1961)3.
- 20 Interview with Tombel Community Water Committee Manager (Mr A.E. Ewane), 24 April 1999.
- 21 SNEC Provincial Director for SW Province, Ndip Soloman, March 1998, April 1999, February 2003.
- 22 Management Report of the Tombel Community Water Supply Scheme (1999) available from committee.
- 23 Secretary of State for Urban Development (Luma) memo to ExCo February 1971, BNA File No. Rd (1971)2.
- 24 Secretary of State for Urban Development (Luma) memo to ExCo February 1971, BNA File No. Rd (1971)2.

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