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COMMODIFICATION

In contemporary dictionaries and encyclopedias, the concept of commodity is hardly referred to—least of all commodification. But it is one of the most central categories of capitalist society. The concept of commodity is as old as class societies. In precapitalist societies, it occupied a minor place as a social category, but it came to occupy a central place in social and political theories in the age of capitalist society. The principal theorists of commodification are Adam Smith (1723–1790) and Karl Marx (1818–1883).

In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels write that everything that is a need will be turned by capitalism into a commodity. They describe the development of capitalism as a process of permanent commodification. What is interesting about this assertion is the close association of the concepts of needs and commodity. *Commodities* are goods that are produced to satisfy certain human needs. This qualitative aspect of commodities refers to what political economists since the publication of Smith's *Wealth of Nation* call use-value. Since they are, however, exchanged as commodities, they are also necessarily quantified and reduced to what Marx called abstract human labor. This quantitative aspect of commodities is called exchange-value. In capitalism, the primary goal of production is the production of exchange-values rather than use-values. In other words, the satisfaction of human needs is the secondary goal of capitalist production. In the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx refers to capitalism therefore as a society in which wealth appears to be an immense accumulation of commodities.

In terms of human relations, this negative relationship between use-value and exchange-value in a commodity is referred to as a paradox of values. The concept of commodification points to the spread of this paradox to all human relations, leading to what Marx called alienated labor and commodity fetishism. There are two primary prerequisites for commodification: the social and technical division of labor and monopolization of the means of production in the hands of a few. There are three spheres of human life

that are subject to commodification: the external natural world, the external social world, and the internal or psychological social and individual world. The debate about ecological crisis refers to the commodification of nature, and the debate about economic and social crises points to the widening and limits of the commodification of human relations.

—Dogan Göçmen

See also Marx, Karl; Marxist Theory; Smith, Adam

Further Readings

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COMMUNISM

Communism can be understood as a form of social organization, a set of ideals, and a movement toward those ideals and the kind of social organization that would embody them. As a form of social organization, communism would abolish private property in the means of production, articles of consumption, or both. In so doing, it would try to realize such ideals as a rationally ordered and just society, a society that prioritizes communal and social welfare, a cooperative and caring community that transcends individual competition and egoism, and an egalitarian and classless society. From ancient times to the present, a variety of different kinds of communist experiments have been attempted, and a number of communist utopian ideals have been proposed. Self-conscious communist movements and utopian proposals have taken both

religious and secular, ascetic and materially affluent, celibate and sexually promiscuous forms. They have also taken authoritarian, democratic, and libertarian forms. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the dominant political movements were inspired by Marxist or anarchist thinkers who, for the most part, assumed that a general social and political revolution was necessary to bring about communism.

There is good reason to believe that early hunting gathering societies were communist, as such societies could not have a developed division of labor or class structure. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels labeled such social forms "primitive communism." The Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras organized a communist experiment in southern Italy, which was a combined university and monastic order. The Pythagoreans were mystics who believed that the physical universe and moral universe could be reduced to a harmonious system of numbers. Thus, for the Pythagoreans, private property, which destroyed the harmony and equality of the whole, was the origin of social injustice. The example of the Pythagorean community, as well as the philosophy of Pythagoras himself, influenced Plato's conception of justice as described in *The Republic*. Plato's utopian ideal divides society into three classes: (1) artisans, who are allowed to have private property as long as it is kept within supervised limits; (2) auxiliaries, who are a combination of soldiers and police force and who are allowed to have some degree of luxuries but not private property; and (3) Guardians, who rule the society and are allowed neither private property nor material luxury. The basis of the society is the division of labor, each part of which must evidence a certain virtue in harmony with the society as a whole. For Plato, the society is just if each of these classes is fulfilling its appointed task well. As the Guardians have the responsibility for the society as a whole, it is especially important that anything that would promote self-interest or would divert them from being wise and socially responsible must be eliminated. Hence, they must live communally without any private property or material luxury. Plato also insists on the equality of women and the ability of women to be Guardians. However, insofar as family ties would promote private

interests over communal interests, the Guardians are also not allowed to form separate families, and their children must be raised communally. Plato's conception of communism may strike the modern reader as strange, because it emphasizes class distinctions and is communism only for the ruling class. However, it is important to recognize that Plato's allowance of private property for the artisans is based on his assumption that only certain people can have the sort of knowledge required for wisdom. If, however, one makes the modern assumption of the potential equality of all human beings, Plato's reasoning for the necessity of communism could be generalized to everyone.

Another early communist experiment arose in Palestine in the middle of the second century BC and lasted until the end of the first century AD. This was a Jewish sect known as the Essenes. Martin Larson, an American scholar of religions, claims the Essenes were influenced by the Pythagoreans. The Essenes established communities throughout Palestine. They were an apocalyptic sect and were generally monastic, ascetic, vegetarian, and celibate. Their communism was total, as they lived and ate in common and possessed nothing of their own, not even their clothes. It is generally assumed that John the Baptist was an Essene, and some scholars believe that Jesus of Nazareth was considerably influenced by the Essenes, if he were not indeed himself a Nazarene Essene. In any case, the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels are very much in accord with the communist ideas of the Essenes (e.g., The Sermon on the Mount). In the second and fourth chapters of Acts, the apostles are described as owning everything in common, selling their possessions, and distributing their money and goods to each person according to their need. However, once Christianity became a state religion, the communism of the early Christians was relegated to monastic communities. Major Christian figures like St. Augustine argued that the sharing of goods was only possible for those who lived within the monastery walls.

The ideal of communism as a wider social ideal emerged during the Reformation. In the mid-14th century, John Wyclif, an Oxford philosopher and theologian, insisted that the Church should follow the model of the early apostolic poverty. While he did not oppose

private property outside the Church, he assumed that human beings in a state of grace would hold all things in common. However, his followers, known as Lollards, often went further, attacking not only the Church's property but that of the nobility. Some of the Lollard preachers went from England to Bohemia where they, in the beginning of the 15th century, influenced Jan Hus, who was rector of the University of Prague. Hus's challenge to the power of the Church in Bohemia led ultimately to his execution. Although Hus was a reformer, many of his followers were radicals and, at the news of his execution, organized a general uprising in Prague. These Hussites then arranged a truce and left to form a Christian communist community, which they called Tabor, under the leadership of Jan Zizka. In Tabor, there was a complete sharing of goods. Anyone who joined the community was expected to put their possessions into a huge tub; the goods were then distributed among the entire community. The armies of the Pope and the emperor attempted to invade Tabor. They were at first repulsed, but in 1434, Tabor was defeated. The Taborites were forced underground but reemerged in a variety of radical sects. In 1528, an offshoot of the Anabaptists, known as Hutterites, after their leader Jacob Hutter, formed a community in Austerlitz, Moravia. There, the Hutterites organized communal workshops, communal farms, and communal households, dining rooms, and schools. As a result of persecution, many Hutterites emigrated to Ukraine and later to Canada and the United States.

In 1516, Thomas More published *Utopia*, a work that was clearly influenced by Plato's *Republic*. In Book II of *Utopia*, More offers an account of a well-ordered, fictional community in which neither private property nor money exists. In this utopia, the burdens of agricultural labor are shared, and all goods are stored in general warehouses and distributed to everyone according to their needs. In Book I, More offers a satirical account of the English land Enclosure Acts, which had the effect of impoverishing small farmers and pushing them off the land. In 1649, Gerrard Winstanley organized a group of poor laborers and landless peasants to take over the common land on St. George's Hill in southern England. This group became known as Diggers and under Winstanley's leadership,

they began to cultivate the land in the spirit of religious communism. Winstanley had probably read More's *Utopia* but was primarily inspired by the communist ideas in the Gospels. He argued that God had created the earth for all to possess in common and that the Fall of Adam was the introduction of private property. The Diggers assumed that their example would spread across England and that this would initiate a new age in human development. However, while the Diggers were expelled less than a year later, their example continued to inspire communist movements into the 20th century. The Diggers may be considered the first attempt to initiate communism through what Marx would later call the expropriation of the expropriators.

The late 18th and the whole of 19th century witnessed two kinds of communist movements. The first was a proliferation of communist experiments, especially in North America. Most of these communist experiments were inspired by religious ideals. Perhaps the most famous and one of the most long lived of these was the Shaker community, which, under the leadership of Ann Lee, believed in the complete equality of men and women, total common ownership of possessions, and celibacy. Other major religious communist communities were Zoarites in Ohio, which stressed democratic decision making, and the Oneida society, which had a system of communal marriage. The secular communist societies in North America were shorter lived. They were inspired primarily by three utopian thinkers: (1) Etienne Cabot, whose *Voyage to Icaria* was influenced by More's *Utopia* and which contained the phrase, subsequently used by Marx to describe a communist society, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need"; (2) Robert Owen, an English mill owner, who believed firmly that human character could be perfected by perfecting social conditions; and (3) the French political philosopher Charles Fourier, who proposed a complicated system of self-organizing communities.

The second kind of communist movement in the late 18th and 19th centuries was the attempt to organize the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order. Among them was François Émile Babeuf, who organized a secret society, called the Conspiracy of Equals, and attempted to overthrow the Directory that had taken power after the French Revolution. Babeuf was arrested

and executed but became the exemplar of the professional communist revolutionary. In 1847, the Communist League, formerly the League of the Just, asked Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to write a declaration of principles for their organization. The result was the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, later retitled *The Communist Manifesto*, which was published in February 1848, at the same time as the first of many 1848 revolutionary insurrections throughout Europe occurred. With this pamphlet, Marx and Engels became the leading theorists of communist revolutionary movements. In 1864, they helped initiate the first communist international organization in London, and in the latter part of the 19th century and the entire 20th century, their theories dominated communist movements.

For Marx and Engels, communism needed to be divested of its utopian ideas and be put on a scientific basis. The way to do this is through a scientific analysis of historical change, which they called the materialist theory of history. This theory begins with the assumption that human beings are essentially social producers who not only produce what they need but also, in the process, produce who they are historically. This historical process, then, may be understood as a continual transformation of human nature. Because economic production is the most basic form of human activity, it provides the foundation for all other forms of production (e.g., social and political institutions, art, and philosophy). From this, it follows that the underlying roots of historical change must be located at the level of the mode of production. Class struggle, then, is the motor force of history. Class struggle, in turn, is generated by the conflict between the forces, or means, of production (land, labor, raw material, and tools) and class relations. Thus, when, in the feudal era, the development of industrial technology reached the point where the feudal organization of production prevented its further development, a class struggle arose between the emerging bourgeoisie (capitalist class) and the feudal lords. Similarly, Marx and Engels argued, the capitalist organization of production, based on the necessary pursuit of private profit, is incompatible with the rational utilization of the enormous productive forces created by capitalism. The result is a new class struggle, now between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (working class). The abolition of

capitalism is, thus, a historical necessity, and it requires the abolition of classes, commodity production, and private ownership of the means of production. Thus, revolutionary movements for communism need to ground themselves in a historical analysis of capitalism. What is wrong with utopian communities is that they can occupy, at most, a temporary corner of capitalist society. What is wrong with utopian socialist theories, like those of Owen and Fourier, is that they think that moral reasoning can, by itself, create communism.

However, while Marx and Engels eschewed utopian thinking, they had an elaborate vision of communism. This vision can be divided into two stages: what Marx, in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* called “first phase communism” and “second phase,” or “full communism.” This is because, for them, communism in its full form, cannot exist immediately after the overthrow of capitalism. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the capitalist mentality cannot be changed overnight. The second is that members of the former capitalist class will attempt to regain their power. To satisfy the first problem, first phase communism needs to provide a form of capitalist incentive. Therefore, it may allow some degree of private ownership and market activities. It will distribute the goods according to the output of work and level of skill. To respond to the second problem, first phase communism will need to maintain a state apparatus, controlled no longer by the capitalist class but by the working class, a State which is now the dictatorship of the proletariat. Nonetheless, first phase communism will open the possibility of a more fully developed communism. It will socialize the major industries of production. It will provide essential goods and services so that everyone has access to them (e.g., free education, free medical care, free child services). It will reorganize the State as a workers’ democracy in such a way that its repressive apparatus can begin to wither away. Thus, when the forces of production are advanced enough, first phase communism will pave the way for full communism. In full communism, work becomes a source of creative fulfillment; distribution of goods is in accord with needs; classes will no longer exist; individuals will have abundant free time to develop their many potentials; and there is no longer a need for a repressive state apparatus. Many commentators have argued that this final vision is

indeed a form of utopianism. Marx and Engels would answer that their approach does not deny vision but insists on grounding it in historical possibility.

The 20th century has not confirmed Marx's vision. The Soviet Union, created by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, had very little in common with Marx's first phase communism. The dictatorship of the proletariat became the dictatorship over the proletariat by a party and managerial bureaucracy that were ruled, in turn, by a very small elite within the Central Committee. The State, far from beginning to wither away, became an elaborate instrument of ever-increasing repression. A new class system developed. By the 1970s, after an earlier period of rapid industrial development, the economic system had become stagnant. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev tried to reform the system through *glasnost* (political openness) and *perestroika* (economic restructuring). In 1989, the Soviet Empire began to unravel. In December 1991, after an attempted putsch by forces opposed to the reforms, Gorbachev resigned, the Soviet Union was dismantled, and Russia attempted a transition to capitalism. Much the same could be said about Chinese communism: Today, China is attempting to become a capitalist country under the direction of the Communist Party. The First International was split between the followers of Marx and Engels and those who followed the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin differed with Marx on a number of strategic questions, and his main opposition to Marx was focused on first phase communism. For Bakunin, it was important to oppose not only the rule of Capital but the rule of the State. Maintaining a repressive state apparatus would, he insisted, create an authoritarian bureaucracy and undermine the egalitarian goal of communism. In effect, Bakunin, like other anarchist-communists, believed it is possible and necessary to go directly to what Marx called full communism without an intermediary stage. Peter Kropotkin, the Russian naturalist and perhaps historically the most important theorist of anarchist-communism, envisioned a society based on democratic communes, which would be federated with one another rather than having a central authority. In his book, *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin argues that cooperation rather than competition is what enables

species in general to survive and that human beings are not an exception to this rule.

Different conceptions about human nature often reflect people's political positions. Those who think that human nature is innately competitive and selfish or that there is an aggressive instinct will use these conceptions to support the claim that communism, in any form, is impossible. If Marx is right, human nature is continuously transformed throughout history. If Kropotkin is right, the motive for communism is built into human nature. The 20th century has not confirmed Marx's vision of communism, but neither has it disconfirmed it. At the most, it demonstrates that communism needs to be organized in a different way, and the history of communist thinking and experiments shows that there are many possible communist alternatives.

—Karsten J. Struhl

See also Anarchism; Bolsheviks; Communist Manifesto; Engels, Friedrich; Marx, Karl; Marxist Theory; Utopian Communities

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COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

By Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), the *Communist Manifesto* was first published in February 1848 and is reportedly the world's most widely read book after the Bible. Marx