

# Chapter 9

## Commodification

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### Introduction

The nexus of commodification with environmental change and environmental politics is of immense and growing interest to geographers and activists alike. There are several good reasons for this. First, the global criss-cross of commodities via far-flung networks of production, investment, coordination, distribution, and exchange leaves behind traces of myriad kinds with important and intertwined social and environmental implications. This includes by-products such as persistent organic pollutants, gaseous emissions from combustion and other chemical processes, and an assortment of organic and inorganic wastes. It also includes ecosystems transformed by and for production, for example, forests converted to plantations for fibre or other products, and land devoted to agricultural production. Even the city itself, emerging from dense intersecting networks of commodity production and exchange, is sustained in part by complex metabolic transformations of biophysical nature in the production of urban spaces (Cronon, 1991; Gandy, 2002; 2005; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003).

Second, direct forms of the commodification of what we understand as nature (both non-human *and* human, it must be said) seem to have proliferated in recent years. This includes new or reinvigorated commercialisation of discrete resources from water to fish to seeds to genes (see, e.g., Bakker, 2003; McAfee, 2003; Mansfield, 2004a; McCarthy, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2005), propelled in substantial measure by private firms seeking new avenues for the circulation of capital in and through discrete biophysical processes (Kloppenborg, 2004). Yet, it bears noting, no small amount of the impetus for this recent acceleration in nature's commodification comes from explicit policy prescriptions advocating privatisation and market exchange as means to better conserve and rationally manage natural resources and the environment (McAfee, 1999; Liverman, 2004). A proliferation of so-called 'market-based' mechanisms in environmental governance has deepened the commodification of particular biophysical processes and entities under the influence of a broad 'neoliberalisation' of nature (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Heynen et al.,

2007), including the emergence of carbon offset markets as well as biodiversity conservation programmes and wetland banking systems (see, e.g., respectively MacDonald, 2005; Robertson, 2006).

Finally, it is not only in the strictly material sense that nature is increasingly commodified. Rather, what we come to know as nature seems ever more tied to commodity circuits. From representations of pristine and wild spaces circulated to sell travel and adventure tourism, to the invocation of pastoral mythologies in the sale of everything from cheese to wine, and even to scientific representations that help render biophysical entities alienable and commensurable (Bridge and Wood, 2005; Robertson, 2006), 'nature' in the semiotic sense of the term is also subject to processes of commodification.

In this context, a growing and diverse range of scholarship and activism has tackled in various ways the commodification of nature, the nature of commodification, and the social and environmental implications of commodification. Though I cannot do justice to this full range, I would argue most of this literature is animated by various forms of three key questions: (i) What does commodification entail, in general terms and specifically with respect to nature? (ii) How exactly are discrete elements of nature (non-human *and* human, material and symbolic) made to circulate in the commodity-form? (iii) What are the interlinked social and environmental implications of commodifying nature, and of commodification more generally?

## Definitions

Despite the ubiquity of commodities and a rich and growing literature on commodities and commodification, there are in fact longstanding, enduring and important differences in the ways that these terms are conceptualised and deployed. For instance, some have invoked more generic notions of commodity as *anything* that is exchanged or is exchangeable (e.g., Appadurai, 1986). This expansive sense of the term implicitly recognises the diverse historical, geographical, and cultural circumstances under which peoples have met their needs and desires by means of exchange. It also suggests (again, somewhat implicitly) that things become commodities through exchange; thus, 'commodity' or commodity-form is an acquired trait (Castree, 2001) representing but one phase in the 'complex social life of things'.

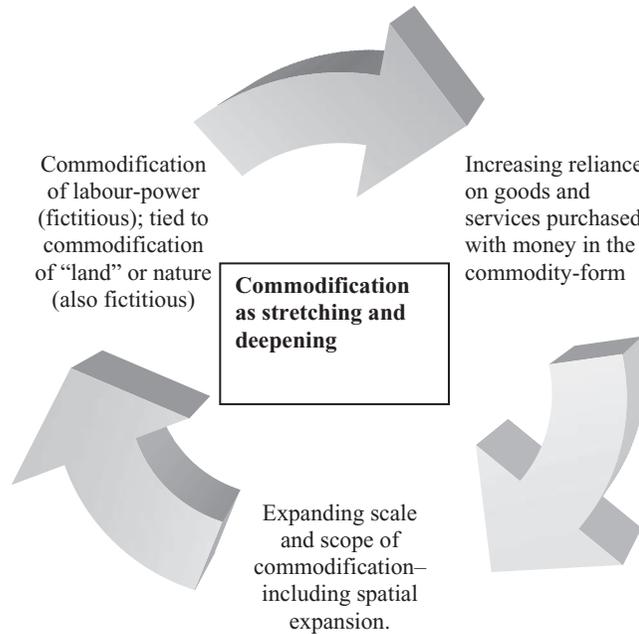
Yet, reference exclusively and simply to exchange as the defining feature of a commodity misses some potentially important distinctions, particularly in a contemporary world of seemingly rampant commodification (Sayer, 2003). For some, then, a crucial role in increasingly far-flung contemporary commodity circuits is played by money, not least in providing a common metric of value and thus allowing production and exchange to be separated by great gulfs of time and space. Castree, for instance, defines commodification as '... a process where qualitatively distinct things are rendered equivalent and *saleable through the medium of money*' (Castree, 2003, p. 278, emphasis added). Similarly, Ben Page (2005) states that '... a commodity is an object that is bought and sold *with money*' and that commodification is '... the process during which a thing that previously circulated outside monetary exchange is brought into the nexus of a market...' (p. 295, emphasis added). And Peter Jackson (1999, p. 96) argues that 'commodification' refers '... literally, to the extension of the commodity form to goods and services that were not previously commodified'. He goes on to point to the 19th century as a period of exploding commodification (first and most particularly evident in Britain)

as the commodity-form became the dominant vehicle by which economic value was expressed (and made to travel), and the predominant way in which human needs and wants (i.e., use values) were secured.

An important connotation of Jackson's notion of commodification is that it points to interlinked transformations, including in the realms of *both* production and exchange. That is, as consumption or demand is increasingly met via exchange, production becomes increasingly oriented towards exchange. This is perhaps why economic historian Karl Polanyi, in considering the significance of what he viewed as modern, market-centred economies, defined commodities '... as objects produced for sale on the market' (Polanyi, 1944, p. 75). This is a simple yet subtle statement that does two things. First it links the dynamics of production and consumption in commodification, seemingly important (as we will see) if we want to know not only how and why commodities are exchanged, but also something of where they come from, and how they travel through various stages from inputs of raw materials and labour, through transportation, storage and distribution, and ultimately to markets (and waste disposal!). This is important to note not least because overly singular focus on the realms of either production or exchange has been a consistent source of tension in the commodification of nature literature, and in the literature on commodities more generally.<sup>1</sup> Second, however, Polanyi's deceptively simple framing implicates a shift towards economic production increasingly motivated *by or for exchange*. This shift has profound implications. The significance of production motivated increasingly by exchange has long been noted, including in the writing of Aristotle, in the work of numerous classical political economists (including Adam Smith and Karl Marx), and of course by Polanyi. This lineage of thought views with suspicion economic production driven primarily or even exclusively by the pursuit of profit and money as ends in and of themselves (rather than, for instance, commodity exchange purely as an outlet for surplus production), and this is a concern evident in more popular and pejorative invocations of the term 'commodification' (see, e.g., Booth, 1994; Sayer, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Whether one shares this normative concern or not, historically, the notion of commodification '... as a change from producing what previously or otherwise might have been simply use values to producing things for their exchange value' (Sayer, 2003, p. 343) points to a sociological transformation particularly apparent in and an important feature of capitalist political economies.

Synthesising these observations, and recognising the need to consider what might be distinct about the complex socio-spatial and institutional networks of contemporary commodity circuits in an increasingly integrated global economy, we might usefully define commodification as interlinked processes whereby: production for use is systematically displaced by production for exchange; social consumption and reproduction increasingly relies on purchased commodities; new classes of goods and services are made available in the commodity-form<sup>3</sup>; and money plays an increasing role in mediating exchange as a common currency of value. And given this, it might be useful to consider two distinct moments in commodification. The first of these is the development of relations of exchange spanning across greater distances of space and time (market expansion) or *stretching*. The second is the systemic provisioning of more and more types of things (goods and services) in the commodity-form, or *deepening* (see figure 9.1).<sup>4</sup>

Note here in particular that an emphasis on commodification suggests dynamism, change, and process, pointing to transformations always more (or less) in a state of



**Figure 9.1** Commodification as integrated processes of stretching and deepening, including the increasing commodification of biophysical nature (i.e., the circulation of discrete socio-natures in the commodity-form).

flux and transition (Castree, 2001). Despite evident tendencies, there is a diversity of ways in which discrete goods and services come to be produced, circulated and exchanged in the commodity-form, shaped in part by the material and discursive character of what is being commodified, as well as the geographical and historical context in which these processes occur. In no way does any of this imply that there is a single path to commodity status (this is a particularly important theme in the commodification of nature literature). Moreover, and as I return to below, the process-oriented valence of commodification suggests the possibility of reversal, and thus of (de)commodification (Page, 2005; Sayer, 2003).

## Capitalism and Commodification

No one has proposed – not even Karl Marx – that commodities and processes of commodification are in and of themselves unique features of capitalist political economies. Nor is it true that all of the commodities circulating in our (more than) capitalist world are produced and exchanged under the auspices of the private sector, profit driven economy. States, for instance, clearly produce commodities (given the definitions above), not least via state-owned companies, utilities, etc. (e.g., electricity, water, public transportation services). One can even trace complex histories of energy and water service delivery which ebb and flow between state and private provisioning, and yet which remain commodified in important respects throughout (Bakker, 2005; Page, 2005). And it is quite clear that the historical origins of far flung commodity regimes – e.g. the sugar trade (Mintz, 1985) – are

just as much tied to the emergence of capitalism as they are products of this emergence (Wolf, 1982).

Even still, conceptualising commodification serves as an invitation to consider what differences, if any, characterise the development of a system of generalised commodity production and circulation in a capitalist political economy. Many scholars *have* chosen to make this distinction, though not all for the same reason. Marx, for instance, while recognising that commodities predate capitalism, also theorised commodification under capitalism as a switch from the mercantilist sale of commodities to secure money to buy commodities (represented in the abstract by C-M-C) towards the outlay of money as capital to produce commodities in order to sell for more money-capital (M-C-M'). Marx argues that this represents an important transition towards a more generalised system of commodity production and exchange, one whose culmination is in many ways signified by the commodification of labour, or what he called labour-power.

Why mark this transition and the emergence of ostensibly commodified labour, particularly if our primary interest is in environmental geographies of commodification? At one level, the commodification of labour-power, that is, the development of markets in labour and the emergence of large numbers of people (indeed the majority in capitalist societies) who work for wages in order to secure their own social reproduction (as well as to satisfy all manner of aspirations necessary and otherwise) is pivotal to the *deepening* of commodification mentioned above. This is because the availability of people to work in a wider and wider range of commodity producing sectors is tied in turn to the economic demand created by these same people who buy what they need (and want) to live. From this perspective, it is hard to imagine the generalised character of commodification, including the commodification of nature in various respects, without considering the character of wage labour and the labourers themselves who comprise a primary, though by no means sole market for commodities. Food provides an excellent example, since it is only the existence of large numbers of people who cannot or do not produce their own food that allows food to be produced primarily in the commodity-form. Moreover, as numerous scholars in the agrarian and food literatures have observed, the shifting dynamics of labour markets over time (e.g., the entry of large numbers of women into the labour force in industrialised countries since about the middle of the 20th century) are tied directly to the commodification of food (e.g., the increasing sale of pre-cooked and pre-prepared meals) (Guthman, 2002).<sup>5</sup> This is in one sense a specific example of a more fundamental connection between the commodification of labour-power through the emergence of wage labour, and the commodification of land in so much as the latter entails separation of labour from 'land' broadly understood (Polanyi, 1944; Marx, 1977). However, these should not be understood as stages in the prehistory of capitalism but rather as systemic tendencies that continue to be manifest in a variety of guises (Kloppenborg, 2004; Glassman, 2006).

A second reason to mark the commodification of labour-power and the historically and sociologically distinct character of M-C-M' – again particularly emphasised by Marx and many Marxist scholars – is that it is integral to an account of the uniquely dynamic and growth oriented character of capitalist production and capital accumulation on an ever-expanding scale. The extraction and reinvestment of surplus (signified by a positive difference between M' and M) fuels a restless drive to reproduce and expand the scale and scope of commodification via stretching and

deepening in order (i) to provide outlets for the productive capacity of this expanded capital; and (ii) to renew conditions of profitability eroded by capitalist competition. Commodification under capitalism thus entails the proliferation of circuits (including biophysical ones) through which this capital as value-in-motion may flow. This in part propels the restless, growth driven logic of capitalist political economies, with important geographical implications, including a tendency to expand and rework the space economy (Harvey, 1982; 1985), and with it, to make and remake, transform and 'produce' nature (Smith, 1984; 1996). These tendencies are manifest in demands for greater and greater amounts but also more and more different kinds of raw material inputs while at the same time generating waste products (typically) on an expanding scale and in frequently novel forms.<sup>6</sup> All of this gives capitalism its own specific form of socio-natural *metabolism* (Foster, 2000), distinct ways in which biophysical nature is appropriated, made and remade.

### Commodification and/of Nature

All that said, considerable recent scholarship in geography and related fields has examined the commodification of specific natures as a sort of collective 'special case' based in part on the 'difference' that biophysical processes make in shaping and conditioning trajectories of commodification (e.g., Bridge, 2000; Sayre, 2002; Bakker, 2003; Prudham, 2005). At a basic level, the idea here is that the commodification of any particular 'nature' relies on ecological production processes whose subordination to the realm of market-coordination can only ever be partial. One might say further that this includes both non-human and human nature, in as much as the reproduction of labour-power by market coordination alone is a project in the commodification of human nature (as bodies, as identities, etc.) and is, similarly, a dubious if not impossible project.

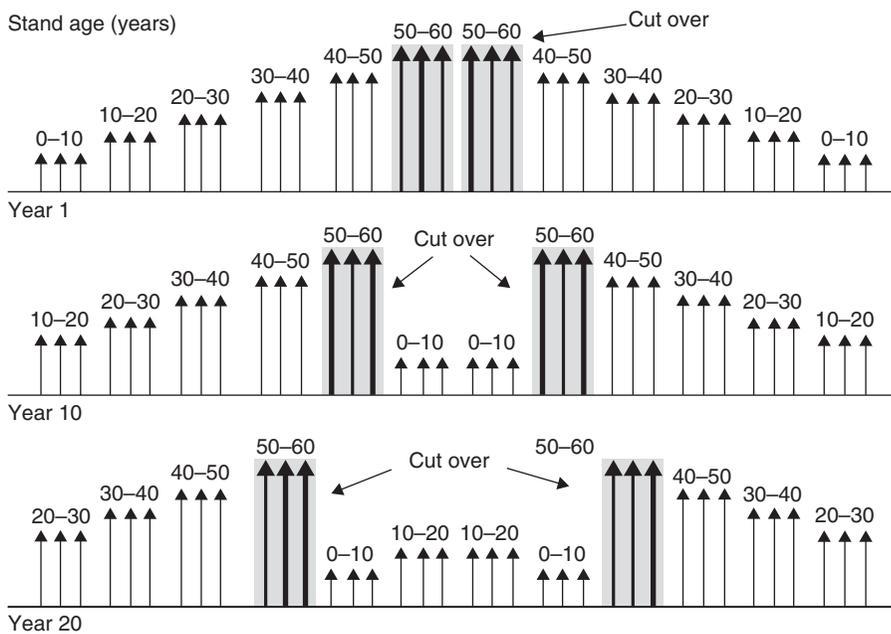
These seemingly basic observations underpin Polanyi's (1944) argument that labour and nature can only ever be *fictitious* commodities. According to Polanyi, nature and labour are special categories of commodity in that they are not literally produced exclusively or even primarily for sale. For instance, if we consider non-human, biophysical nature, ecological functions of myriad kinds remain clearly important in the provision of all manner of environmental inputs and services, and these are only incompletely coordinated by social decision making, including market coordination (see discussion and elaboration in Prudham, 2005). Recognising this basic fictitiousness points to all manner of problems with calls to privatise nature and to extend markets in order to meet environmental objectives. If nature is only a fictitious commodity, then market coordination in the allocation of environmental goods and services can only ever be partial. And this is so not only because of what we might call strictly 'objective' constraints (i.e., that formally economic production relies on all manner of formally non- or extra-economic production whose complete subordination to the market is simply not possible) but also because of subjective concerns having to do with social struggle over the allocation of biophysical nature (i.e., that quite apart from the physical impossibility of subordinating biophysical processes wholly to the price mechanism, 'society' in the broadest sense will never accept this politically) (O'Connor, 1998). The creation of markets in water, for instance, can give rise to or reinforce the separation of large numbers of people from reliable access to water (Smith, 2004). This in turn can violate commonly held sensibilities concerning rights to water which are perceived to trump commercial,

market driven allocation, making the commodification of water a political flash-point (Page, 2005; Bakker, 2007). This is an example, however, of ways in which 'the economy' is socially embedded via notions of a moral economic order that governs the social allocation of nature as a set of entitlements (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976; Booth, 1994). These kinds of arguments present rather fundamental difficulties for the utopian ideal of markets as a sole means of allocating goods and services (Polanyi, 1944).

The lineages of these observations are broadly evident in a recent literature which examines the contradictory and highly specific ways in which non-human nature is made to circulate in the commodity-form. Considerable scholarship has explored the various ways in which highly specific, lively and unruly, material and contested 'natures', including water (Bakker, 2003; Swyngedouw, 2005); fish (McEvoy, 1986; Mansfield, 2003); trees (Prudham, 2003; 2005); wetlands (Robertson, 2006); fossil fuels and minerals (Bridge, 2000; Bridge and Wood, 2005); genes (McAfee, 2003); organic foods (Guthman, 2002; 2004), etc. are extracted, cultivated, refined, processed, represented and made to circulate in the commodity-form, and with all manner of political and ecological implications. A common thread in the literature, echoing Polanyi, is that there is nothing 'natural' about nature's commodification. Rather, considerable work is required on various fronts to circulate nature in the commodity-form.

For instance, one key theme in recent literature concerns the ways in which commodification actually turns on the apparent dissolution of important qualitative differences in the rendering of distinct things equivalent or commensurable. Castree (2003) refers to this as *abstraction*, a process by which systematic representations dissolve the specificity of things (any specific things) in favour of their aggregation into classes of things. A good deal of work along these lines has been inspired by William Cronon's (1991) book *Nature's Metropolis*, and in particular, a chapter on wheat called 'A Sack's Journey'. Cronon traces a series of technological and organisational innovations underpinning the emergence of Chicago as the premier market for wheat in the United States during the 19th century. He examines in particular how the convention of transporting wheat in sacks from individual farms gave way to aggregation, allowing more efficient transport in rail cars, mass storage in grain elevators, and highly fluid forms of exchange including sophisticated futures markets. For Cronon, a key and socially mediated development was the conversion of continuous differentiation in wheat quality into discrete categories or grades of wheat that sold at different prices corresponding to standardised grades. These grades helped dissolve the specificity of wheat and the farms from which it had been shipped in individual, identifiable sacks. Perhaps the chapter's most compelling line of argument is that the expansion of Chicago's wheat market, with all this entailed, could not have occurred had the abstraction of wheat not allowed for it to be aggregated in ways that replaced the sack but still made wheat 'legible' to buyers and traders.

This and work along similar lines suggests that acts of representation and in fact what might be called *social relations of abstraction* are necessary in order for discrete things to be rendered commensurable and exchangeable, particularly where money is involved. A curious feature of abstraction, however, is that difference is both dissolved (as kernels with different characteristics are lumped into the same grade) but also renegotiated and reproduced in legible forms, e.g., as discrete grades of wheat. Without this, the complex circuits of material and symbolic exchange in



**Figure 9.2** The Normalbaum (literally normal tree or forest) idealized as a set of discrete, even-aged forest stands in various stages of regrowth after harvesting. This is the abstracted ideal of 20th century, scientific, sustained yield forestry and has been critical to making forests legible, which in turn enables their rational conversion to wood based commodities. Such scientific representations, whatever else they may accomplish, facilitate the abstraction of timber and indeed whole forests from specific social and ecological contexts, making them commensurate across space and time and thereby enabling exchange and commodification to proceed. Reprinted with permission from Demeritt (2001).

wheat or any other large-scale market could simply not occur. Similar processes and arguments could be inferred from the commodification of many biophysical inputs, from grades of logs and lumber to oil (typically indexed by price and quality to regional variants, e.g., Saudi crude). Moreover, the abstractions that underpin far-flung exchanges tie the commodification of nature to systems of representation more broadly – including weights and measures but also natural science – as regimes of calculation and expertise that more generally make nature and territory ‘legible’ and governable (Scott, 1998; Mitchell, 2002).

David Demeritt (2001), for instance, examines the development of key techniques for representing forest resources in the context of 20th century American scientific forest management, including via the uptake of the concept of the *Normalbaum* or ‘normal forest’ from the European tradition of scientific forestry (see figure 9.2). As Demeritt argues (drawing on the conceptual work of Timothy Mitchell and Michel Foucault), these representations allowed the liquidation but also conservation of forest resources in America to become (or at least appear to be) calculable and coherent socio-ecological projects; they thus underpinned the emergence of state-centred forest management as a form of governmentality (literally the conduct of

conduct). Equally, however, these representations facilitated the abstraction of timber and indeed whole forests from specific social and ecological context, making them commensurate across space and time and thereby enabling exchange and commodification to proceed. While these processes of 'statistical picturing' are hardly innocent of power relations (Prudham, 2007b), they also have material effects beyond consolidating managerial expertise and commodification processes. Rather, and as Demeritt also observes, abstraction away from the specificity of forests is also complicit in the production of ecologically simplified forests in the image of the abstraction, while also tending to downplay social contestation of access to and control of forests as social spaces (see Robbins, 2001; Braun, 2002).

Emphasis on the systematic representations that underpin abstraction highlights complex cultural and political processes by which nature as a set of *sign-values* is made to circulate in or attendant with the commodity-form, which in turn is productive of prevailing conceptions of nature itself on an increasingly widespread if not global scale (Smith, 1984; Braun, 2006). Morgan Robertson (2000) has interrogated some of this sort of representational 'work' as it has applied to the circulation of wetlands as exchangeable commodities under the US wetland banking system, with a focus on the articulation of environmental science and the commodification of nature. Since the early 1990s, development in wetlands has required a permit from the US Army Corps of Engineers, often granted on the condition of offsets or mitigation. This has propelled the development of systems of commensurability in wetland services. Entrepreneurs began building, restoring, or saving wetlands and applying for certification from the Corps in order to then sell the wetland 'credits' to would-be developers. 'Thus was born wetland mitigation banking: the first successful market in ecosystem services defined as such, rather than (as in the case of air-pollution credits) defined in conventional units of weight or volume. Though still a small industry it is experiencing geometrical growth in membership, and has captured the imagination of those who promote market-led environmental policy' (Robertson, 2006, p. 372). Robertson (2006) pays particular attention to the role of scientists in certifying wetlands, and in monitoring the status of wetlands in the programme. Teams of ecologists are enrolled to make scientific judgements about commensurability using what are called Rapid Assessment Methodologies (RAMs!). As Robertson writes, 'RAMs function as instruments of *translation between science, policy, and economics*. . . . Early in the development of wetland banking it was recognized that the commodity to be traded must be defined in a way that maintained a consistent identity across space and time. . . . This task must be accomplished before any market can function, not just markets in ecosystem services' (Robertson 2006, p. 373, emphasis added).

All this in mind, it is important to remember that abstraction is not sufficient for commodification to occur, nor is exchange the only nor perhaps even most salient feature of commodification. Consider, for instance, Cronon's narrative about wheat. While he dwells on the construction of new categories of wheat's representation and the concomitant expansion of the Chicago wheat exchange, there is no discussion of processes of farm consolidation, changing agronomic practices, proletarianisation, and rural to urban migration in the context of a rapidly expanding wheat market. Instead, one might well argue that as powerful as Cronon's insights remain, he ends up re-inscribing what Marx called the 'fetish of the commodity' by focusing narrowly on commodities as exchange-values unto themselves (see the next section on fetishism). In a useful review and synthesis, Castree (2003) argues that there are

in fact six distinct but inter-related moments in the commodification of nature, including not only abstraction, but also privatisation, alienability, individuation, valuation, and displacement.<sup>7</sup> Picking up on some of these points, Bakker (2005) argues for careful distinctions between privatisation, commercialisation and commodification. These are useful insights provided that they not be seen wholly as separate categories of social action. Privatisation schemes, for instance, are frequently as integral to commodification and the development of far-flung exchange as are processes of representation and abstraction, and these schemes are often sites of contradictory imperatives and intense contestation and social struggle (Mansfield, 2004b; 2007). Moreover, privatisation struggles are pivotal moments tied (directly or indirectly) to processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003; Glassman, 2006) and in this respect are not formally distinct but relational moments in the commodification of nature (Prudham, 2007a).

### **Commodity Fetishism, Labels and Alternative Commodity Circuits**

One of the most commonly noted features of commodities in the contemporary world is that it is by no means obvious even to curious consumers where commodities originate and what kinds of social and environmental inputs went into their production and circulation. From a normative and ethical standpoint, this means that it is not obvious what kinds of activities are being supported and reproduced via the purchase of commodities. As David Harvey (1990, p. 423) put it '[t]he grapes that sit on supermarket shelves are mute; we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from'. Complex relations of transformation, circulation and exchange sever '... materially and symbolically the connection between producing exchange and use values ... masking the qualitative social and environmental relations of production' (Kaika and Swynge-douw, 2000, p. 123). This phenomenon, and specifically, the tendency to reify commodities as things in and of themselves (with a concomitant tendency for commodities to take on values somewhat independent of their production and circulation) was termed the 'fetishism' of the commodity by Marx (1977, p. 165).<sup>8</sup>

This idea of the commodity fetish remains a quite powerful notion for scholars and activists interested in commodification processes. At a basic level, and despite different takes on the idea of fetishism per se, a desire to understand the complex trajectories and valences of commodities has animated a rich literature and social activism concerning the 'lives' of commodities, including their geographies, motivated in part by a sense that the spatio-temporal displacements of commodity provisioning – whether conceptualised in terms of chains, networks, or circuits – are becoming more complex in a globalising world (Winson, 1993; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Hartwick, 1998; Leslie and Reimer, 1999; Robbins, 1999). Much of this work seeks not only to document and understand, but also to transform relations of exploitation in realms of production (e.g., Harvey, 1990; Hartwick, 1998; Hartwick, 2000; Mutersbaugh, 2004). In this sense, commodity chain and commodity circuit analyses offer strong complementarities with life-cycle assessment methodologies developed in the physical and engineering sciences, seeking to document the full range of relations and practices that propel commodities, including ecological inputs and lifetime environmental impacts from production, circulation, and disposal.

All that said, the fetishism idea is not without its critics. One problem is that aggressive invitations to get 'past' or 'behind' the veil of the fetishism of commodities in order to unmask them – as for example explicitly advocated by Hartwick (2000) and Harvey (1990) – run the risk of assuming that the origins of commodities are unambiguous and also that the 'facts' of exploitation and ecological degradation can speak for themselves (Jackson and Holbrook, 1995; Jackson, 1999; 2002; Page 2005). However, highly complex trajectories and displacements of even single commodities in the contemporary international economy (see Dicken, 1998) suggest that 'origins' are multiple and not at all obvious. Indeed, the proliferation of production sites serving mass markets in seemingly generic commodities shows considerable geographical variation, so much so that the geography and politics of production cannot be read backward simply from commodities (Leslie and Reimer, 1999). Moreover, power, agency, and decision-making capabilities are often distributed in complex, dispersed and contradictory ways across networks linking commodity production, distribution and consumption (Marsden et al., 1996; Friedberg, 2004). In some ways, then, commodity chains and circuits do not have clear end points; they merely proliferate, requiring careful analytical and political choices in the conduct of commodity chain analyses and campaigns.

In addition, it is not always apparent what political and ethical commitments, judgements, and actions will or should attend the revealed origins of commodities. Indeed, despite commodity chain analyses that provide a '... critique of consumption founded on geographical detective work ... highlighting the connection between producers and consumers' (Hartwick, 2000, p. 1178), it is not necessarily clear what changes in consumption or production practices ought to follow from this work. Instead, political action requires difficult choices to be made, including between contending forms of social liberation and exploitation among commodity producers, and sometimes between social and ecological dimensions of enhanced sustainability (Mutersbaugh, 2004). Is it socially just, for instance, to choose to reduce food miles by eating locally and truncating food trade if this means depriving distant peasants and farm-workers of their livelihoods in globally integrated food production and distribution circuits (Friedberg, 2004)?

On these and related issues, there is much to draw on from a wide ranging literature that has exploded in the last decade or so concerning the complex geographical and cultural character of commodities and commodity circuits/networks, sometimes referred to generally as the 'commodity cultures' or 'geographies of commodities' literature. This literature is not restricted to questions concerning the commodification of nature, and rather is more broadly concerned with the proliferation of the commodity-form, the complexity of commodity chains/networks, the articulation of culture and economy in and through commodities, and importantly, the complex cultural meanings of commodities and mass consumerism (for useful reviews and commentary, see Jackson, 1999; 2002; Bridge and Smith, 2003; Castree, 2004).

One of the points of contention in this literature is the use (misuse?) of the fetish idea. Some have argued that a focus on fetishism is essentially elitist and pedantic, placing all-knowing scholars (and presumably fair trade activists) above more or less duped consumers (see also Jackson, 2002). Notwithstanding that this is arguably a rather hollow caricature of the fetishism idea as originally formulated by Marx, it at least serves as a useful caution against elitist condemnations of everyday consumption practices. And it leads to the important point that consumers and a

politics of (mass) consumption must not be dismissed or disregarded (Miller, 1998; Jackson, 1999). Research on commodity circuits (e.g., Le Heron and Hayward, 2002) and commodity cultures shows instead that consumption is a domain of struggle and contestation, and that forms of cultural learning and of both solidarity and emancipation can also emerge in and through a politics of consumption (Jackson and Holbrook, 1995; Jackson and Taylor, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Johns and Vural, 2000; Sayer, 2003). Through this lens, consumption becomes a site of tremendous political importance, including in forging the very links between otherwise disconnected people (e.g., via the transnationalisation of food and diet) that can easily be overlooked in the rush to get behind commodities and consumption (Cook and Crang, 1995). The commodity cultures literature draws attention to the imagined geographies that can and do circulate with commodities as powerful and productive sources of knowledge about the world (Domosh, 2006). Some of these may well be highly dubious and even manipulative (e.g. think of the utopian Valley of the Jolly Green Giant from whence your vegetables ostensibly emerge, or the smiling campesino Juan Valdez picking *your* perfect coffee bean). And social learning and liberation achieved via the consumption of capitalist commodities will always be fraught (Jackson, 2002).<sup>9</sup> But these imagined geographies are in and of themselves important cultural facets of commodification, and cannot be ignored even if and when they tend to promote homogenous, flatter worlds of 'McDonaldisation'.

All of this only further reinforces that commodification always entails interwoven material and semiotic processes (Robertson, 2000). In fact, debates about the cultures of commodities and the implications of fetishism and commodity displacements highlights an important but sometimes overlooked aspect of commodity fetishism. Increasing displacement from points of social and ecological production together with the sheer proliferation of the commodity-form attendant with commodification implies that the 'meaning' ascribed to commodities becomes potentially more malleable. That is, the very reification of commodities becomes a powerful and productive facet of commodification itself. This is consistent with Marx's provocative description of the proliferation of value in the commodity-form as a process that '... transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic (Marx, 1977, p. 167). This almost mystical character of commodity fetishism provides not only an invitation to 'get behind the fetish' as it were, but also to 'get with the fetish' in the sense of coming to terms with the production and reproduction of meaning through commodification. Thus, recognition of the tremendous cultural significance of commodified meanings has led some to talk of fetishism in terms of the dreams, desires, and wish images that come to be attached to and circulate with commodities. As Kaika and Syngedouw put it '[t]he fetish character of commodities often turns them into objects of desire in themselves and for themselves, independent from their use value'. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss, they continue that it is the '... very "estrangement of commodities" that makes them capable of becoming "wish images"'. Commodities do not only carry their materiality, but also the promise and the dream of a better society and a happier life' (Kaika and Syngedouw, 2000, p. 123).<sup>10</sup> For them, a specific example is found in the production of coherent notions and wish images of urban modernity which become attached to and signified by highly fetishised technological networks. Somewhat ironically, even though a major facet of these networks is the metabolic transformation of biophysical nature constitutive of the production and reproduction of urban space (e.g., in storm and sanitary sewers, drinking water distribution

and storage, energy systems, etc.), the networks themselves come to embody a wish image of the 'urban' defined, in part, as that which is distinct from and an improvement on 'nature'.

The wishes, desires, and dreams of imaginary geographies that circulate with commodities brings us to scholarship and activism seeking explicitly to transform the socio-ecological character of commodity chains and networks in part by taking hold of the sign values of commodities. This is a central facet of ethical, fair and organic production, and trade campaigns seeking more equitable and sustainable material practices in part through the propagation of standards, labels and the like. While these labelling schemes always aim towards some form of greater transparency, as well as a mix of enhanced social justice and ecological sustainability in commodity circuits, they do not eliminate fetishism per se; they rather seek to simultaneously rework both the material and semiotic aspects of commodities (Goodman, 2004).

And in this, consumer education campaigns around better and worse choices of commodity purchases reflect the power that consumers and a politics of consumption can and do have to effect change (see, e.g., Johns and Vural, 2000; Le Heron and Hayward, 2002). Broad-based scholarship and international networks of social activism pursue these goals in part by forging and sustaining connections that span production and consumption, linking disparate human and non-human actors in commodity circuits via mechanisms such as fair, ethical, organic, and sustainable trading regimes, and with wide-ranging implications for the geographies of producing and circulating nature in the commodity-form (McCarthy, 2006). This includes for instance, the development of forest certification schemes which define and seek to support more socially and ecologically sustainable forestry through the certification of wood products, schemes that have had considerable (though contested) impacts in forest commodity networks (Morris and Dunne, 2004; Klooster, 2005; 2006; Stringer, 2006). It also includes a plethora of food labels and certification schemes (e.g., organics) that both reflect and reinforce a widespread cultural and political re-signification of food in recent years, resulting in reworked relations among production and consumption for scholars, activists and 'foodies' alike in conventional and alternative food networks (Watts et al., 2005; Winter, 2003). These dynamics also establish new lines of struggle and contestation as both the form and content of labelling and certification schemes become subject to contending social pressures, on one hand seeking to uphold rigorous standards of social justice and ecological sustainability, and on the other, to hollow these out in favour of light green glosses on conventional, more profit-driven practices (Guthman, 2007).

### **(De)Commodification Redux**

Whatever the outcome of such struggles, it has become clear that the search for alterity in commodity circuits must confront both material and representational practices. Important challenges and dilemmas remain. Can the fetishism of the commodity ever really be enlisted and sustained for the purposes of more socially just and environmentally sound production and consumption relations and practices? Put succinctly, and paraphrasing Guthman (2002), what is the relationship between 'commodified meanings', alternative or otherwise, and 'meaningful commodities' (i.e., more sustainable in a robust sense of the term)? How can resignification schemes overcome the challenge of displacement? Nowhere is the threat of a

narrowing of the progressive promise of meaningful commodities more apparent than in organic food commodity circuits, which, absent certain prescribed chemicals and farm practices, look more and more like conventional, industrialised food circuits every day. Transforming the social relations of agricultural production, questioning productivism (including a full range of questionable growing practices), and providing high-quality nutritious and safe foods for *everyone* remain not only in question, but may actually be undermined by increasing market shares for organics (Guthman, 2003; 2004). More and more, the dynamics of organic food markets seem subject to the systemic processes of competitive commodity production under capitalism outlined succinctly by Kloppenburg (2004). As Mutersbaugh (2004) shows, for instance, struggles over the symbolic and material dimensions of certified coffee indicates an ever-present danger that labels will be co-opted, eliminating provisions for genuinely fair trading, including viable economic returns for independent and co-operative peasant producers.

These are not merely ephemeral, contingent and sector specific issues but rather deep, structural challenges to alternative commodity networks. Recognising them need not mean rehearsing tired debates between structure and agency in the evolution of commodity chains, agricultural or otherwise. Alternative commodity circuits have costs associated with them, not least administrative costs associated with certification (including in governance and enforcement). Who will bear the brunt of these costs (Mutersbaugh, 2005)? Is it socially just if only the more affluent consumers of the world can afford alternative commodities? Moreover, it is in the very nature of displacement and commodity fetishism in the context of competitive, capitalist economies that threats are ever present to more just and benign commodity circuits from competitive profit and rent seeking behaviour. Competition between labels and certification standards, for instance, can confuse consumers while placing downward pressure on standards via price-based competition. Even within labels, efforts to sustain and increase profits in commodity production regimes that remain largely capitalist (or are in competition with capitalist commodities in the same sectors) leads to systemic pressures to compromise, presenting a particular challenge to voluntary labelling and certification schemes (see, e.g., Klooster, 2006; Guthman, 2007). These observations are not meant to cast aspersions on efforts to forge alternative, fair, ethical, and more environmentally benign commodity circuits; quite the opposite. They are meant to reflect realistic assessments of the social (not merely technocratic) challenges involved in establishing and sustaining networks of ethical commitment that are frequently transnational in scope (Goodman, 2004). Maintaining these networks requires organising and solidarity, but also new relations of production, representation and governance that allow diverse actors from across commodity circuits – including workers, peasants, environmentalists and consumers – opportunities for meaningful participation in lasting coalitions. These efforts reinforce the need for political relationships in search of alternative commodity circuits to span the same range as those circuits themselves. And this is one more reason for scholars and activists alike to critically engage with the complex dynamics of commodification in a robust and polyvalent sense of the term, from inputs, to production, to distribution and to consumption.

A final word about decommodification. One of the appealing features of the term commodification is its inherently dynamic connotation. This can be interpreted teleologically to imply that everything, eventually, will be commodified, including our own bodies, and the earth, air and water around us. There are depressing trends

that indeed point in these directions; yet it is important to recall the observation noted above that commodities, or more accurately, the commodity-form of things is not inherent to them. Commodities are made, not born. The commodity-form, put differently is really just one phase in the complex lives of things and ideas (Appadurai, 1986). Even in the conventional world of commodities produced exclusively for sale by profit seeking capitalist firms, commodification is tenuous, incomplete and ephemeral, not monolithic, complete or necessarily lasting. As Sayer (2003) intriguingly discusses, consumption is a form of de-commodification in so far as it reverses the ontology of things from exchange-value back to use-value. Using the same term, but in a different way, Henderson (2004) has argued that the circuits of value and of commodities in a (more than) capitalist political economy – and thus of commodification – are incomplete and ‘leaky’. Even things produced exclusively as exchange-values in order to meet social needs and aspirations via the money economy can have politically charged, unpredictable lives, including mundanely enough in Henderson’s discussion, canned food donated as surplus to food banks for relief. One implication then, is that commodified food produced for exchange-value ends up politicising (as opposed to depoliticising) the social allocation of food. A similar line of reasoning might well be applied to myriad environmental concerns linked to the commodification of nature, e.g., the mountains of non-biodegradable and often toxic waste unevenly distributed across the globe and linked to consumer culture as the detritus of commodification. These represent simultaneously material and semiotic processes of decommodification that draw attention to the limits of commodification as the domination of exchange-value in production, and of some of the limits of displacement in the provision of social needs. Likewise, efforts to achieve fair, ethical, organic or otherwise alternative commodity circuits invoke questions about the limits of commodification, or alternatively, of the degree to which decommodification constrains or bounds the domination of exchange-motivated production. This is not so much about whether or not things are commodities, but the degree to which commodification has taken hold of their social allocation, and what a politics of commodification has to say about that.

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## NOTES

1. For a discussion of how some of these issues have unfolded in the agrarian and food literatures, for example, see (Goodman, 2002; Guthman, 2002; Whatmore, 2002; Winter, 2003).
2. This critique has been accompanied by a parallel concern with consumption as an end in itself, as opposed to for the provision of need, as for example, with so-called status

- or external goods, and more generally, with the emergence of the consumer society and consumption as a measure of social worth – see Sayer (2003).
3. I use this term throughout the essay. At one level, it merely denotes that the provision of discrete objects and ideas has come to occur, at least in significant measure, via commodities produced primarily for sale, and thus that these ‘things’ are increasingly available in the commodity-form. At another level, it expresses the increasing importance of commodities as vehicles for the circulation and expression of value in a capitalist society, and thus for value itself to take the commodity-form.
  4. These terms are productively discussed by Lysandrou (2005) in a paper interrogating globalisation *as* commodification, but he draws on Marx’s analysis of the specificity of *capitalist* commodification, particularly in Volume 2 of *Capital*.
  5. I would like to stress here that my point is not to reify the preparation of food as inherently women’s work, but rather to simply observe historically that much of this work did indeed fall to women in western households, and that as women have become wage workers in increasing numbers, and as two-wage households have become more common, this has been accompanied by important shifts and evidence of deepening in the commodification of food.
  6. One thinks, for instance, of a range of novel synthetic organic and inorganic chemicals produced during the 20th century for a variety of purposes whose toxic legacy, famously chronicled by Rachel Carson (1994), is still unfolding.
  7. I do not discuss all of these here, but instead recommend a careful review of Castree’s (2003) paper. Briefly, privatisation is the creation of new and exclusive forms of property claims over discrete bits of nature allowing them to be transferred between exclusive owners. Alienability refers to the often taken-for granted physical but also cultural processes whereby it becomes possible to sever bits of nature from sellers. This is related to but not wholly synonymous with ownership. Castree offers the example of internal organs, which may be owned but not easily (or painlessly) sold. Individuation is also closely related, and refers to the physical and cultural process of divorcing discrete things or entities from their social and ecological context. Valuation should also be reasonably familiar but refers to the socially mediated processes whereby value(s) are assigned, including monetisation, as well as (and conversely) how things become vehicles for the circulation of value. Finally, displacement is the most inherently geographical notion at play here, though by no means is it only a geographical process. This refers to the effects of time and space distantiating as commodities undergo complex transformation en route from producers to consumers and in ways that make it difficult for consumers to perceive the social and ecological relations, which underpin commodity production and circulation. There is a close conceptual link with fetishism (see below).
  8. Marx writes specifically: ‘In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There, the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities and with the products of men’s [sic] hands. I call this the fetishism, which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and *is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities*’ (emphasis added).
  9. Indeed, as Jackson (2002, p.15) notes in a largely sympathetic review, a danger in ‘... literature on commodity cultures has been to become overly fascinated with the spectacle of consumption and its liberating possibilities, to examine discursive and representational aspects of commodities and their meanings without attending to how these are produced, much less to explore in what ways consumption too underpins not just social and cultural difference but culturally inflected social *differentiation*’.
  10. On commodity fetishism and desire, see the discussion in Page (2005) concerning water in the commodity-form.

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