

The Semiotics of the Commodity in the Marxian Concept of Value

Marco Dantas¹

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (ECO-UFRJ)

When preparing, in *Grundrisse*, his initial conceptual ideas on commodities and value, Marx understood that

Value must also have an existence that is qualitatively different from [commodity] and in the actual exchange, this separability must be an actual separation because the natural diversity of the commodities has to contradict their economic equivalence, and both can only coexist if the commodities acquire a double existence, not only a natural but also a purely economic existence in which the commodity is a mere sign (*Zeichen*), a letter (*Buchstabe*) for a relation of production, a mere sign (*Zeichen*) of its own value (Marx 1983 [1857-61] : 91).²

For Marx, commodities have a double existence. They have a “natural” existence, that is, according to their physical shapes and contents or biological, chemical, physical properties, through which they meet human requirements. They also have an economic existence, as a *sign of value*. Commodities are produced to be exchanged but since actual human needs can vary greatly and diverge from each other, “something” is required to make the exchange of commodities, which enables some measure of comparison between them : this “something” is a value. The commodity as a value is a sign (*Zeichen*), whose substrate are the material products taken to and exchanged in the market. If those products undergo “metamorphoses” during their many stages of production the value stays the same and can be identified as any commodity whatever their practically infinite forms may be. If each commodity must meet particular needs, value is, when paraphrasing the known definition of sign by Peirce, that which represents any commodity to anyone.

Some paragraphs later, Marx wrote : commodities must be exchanged for a “third thing” that “can only be a social symbol (*gesellschaftliches Symbol*)” that should express a social relation. He adds : “this symbol (*Symbol*), this material sign (*materielle Zeichen*) of exchange-value, is a product of exchange itself, and not the execution of an idea conceived *a priori*” (*ibid* : 93). So, here symbol (*Symbol*) appears as one material form of sign (*Zeichen*). This specific symbolic form of the

sign is the money. According to Marx, in so far as Capitalism has evolved since its primitive forms until its current modern status, commodities gradually developed until reaching this condition of being expressed in money, that is, be substituted by its own symbol, this symbol that “becomes the conscious sign (*bewußtes Zeichen*) of exchange-value” (*ibid* : 93).

The value therefore acquires, in the symbolic form of money, a separate existence from the actual commodity and now exists alongside it also as a commodity. Marx adds:

The material in which this symbol (*Symbol*) is expressed is by no means a matter of indifference, however different it seems historically. Society’s development elaborates not only the symbol (*Symbol*) but also the material increasingly suitable for it – a material from which society later tries to disentangle itself; the symbol (*Symbol*), if it were not arbitrary, requires certain conditions of the material in which it is represented. The signs (*Zeichen*) for words, for example the alphabet ,etc., have an analogous history.³ (*ibid* : 94)

A commodity, therefore, as conceptualised by Marx, is not just any object perceived in the world of facts and things, but a specific form : the commodity-form. Of course, there should be something sensitive, matter with volume and mass, to which this form can be referred : clothing, furniture, food, beverages, vehicles, jewellery, costume jewellery, tools, machinery, minerals, or whatever. The many and diverse forms of the commodities could be expressed by a “letter” (*Buchstabe*), a sign. Similarly, it does not matter, for example, how many sensitive forms of <chairs> there may be in the world of objects, they can all be expressed in a single word : |chair|⁴ – the “chair-form”.

Just as a |chair| occupies a precise position in the system of relations of a specific language (in this case, English), and for this reason can have its meanings correctly learned in any communication between those who master the code of this language, the commodity, also in its relation with other commodities, “will speak” its own language : “[commodities only] betrays its thoughts in that language with which alone it is familiar, the language of commodities” (Marx 1995-1996 [1867] : v. 1 : 36). This language is a system of values. When we say |chair| we need a matter-energy audio substrate (in addition to our own body); value is also communicated through the matter-energy substrates of the commodity bodies.

Anthony Wilden (1980 [1972] : 496) comments on this passage that it is “grounded in metaphors of a semiotic relationship”. For Terry Eagleton, many of the key economic categories in Marx are implicitly aesthetic, even having embarked on the detailed study of German aesthetician Friedrich Vischer when he was writing his *magnum opus* on Economics (Eagleton 1990).

Firstly, it would be as an aesthetic object that Marx understood commodity, albeit an aesthetically perverted object, as Eagleton (1990) commented. And its value would be the meaningful expression of a type of social relationship proper of capitalist civilization, imposing on other meaningful expressions in other spaces and times of human history (such as, “faith” “salvation” “loyalty” “obedience” “glory” “destiny” “sacrifice” etc.). Before becoming a product of economic relations, value is a product of cultural relations and can only fulfil its economic functions because it first fulfils cultural functions. In other words, we can understand value, in an

initial approach, as a communication instrument between people whose supports, or channels, are commodities.

The following text will include some extracts from Marx in the light of semiotics. In conclusion, we will indicate the importance of our semiotic reinterpretation of Marx as a perhaps theoretically productive route to understanding the “adventures of the commodity” (Jappe 2003) in this “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1997 [1968], dominated by “aestheticizing commodities” (Jameson 1991), hence the “fetishism of fetishism” of consumer brands (Fontenelle 2002).

But first of all, we need to keep in mind that obviously Marx, in his time, did not have access to this sophisticated semiotic toolset developed by Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), Louis Hjelmslev (1889-1965), Charles Morris (1901-1979) and others. On the other hand, he certainly knew the pioneer semiotic work of John Locke (1632-1704), as is apparent by the references in the *Grundrisse*, and of course, considering his original philosophical education, should be relatively familiar with cognitive or linguistic theories going as far back as to Plato and Aristotle, and more recently to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) or Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

However, if his theory had semiotic foundations, they were certainly supported by the dialectical logic that led his investigations. Concepts or methods that may not be in line with his epistemological or methodological principles should not be, therefore, directly applicable to Marx. On the other hand, we do not have a Semiotic theory that can be considered dialectically canonical. In fact, as we well know, Semiotics or Semiology unfolds in many branches from its founding masters, but none that has founded a real Marxian Semiotic. Some of these branches or authors may, however, have a positive dialogue with dialectical materialism, namely Charles S. Peirce (1931-1935), Charles Morris (1994 [1971]) or Umberto Eco (1976). Others, such as Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1985 [1968]), V. Vološinov (1973 [1939]), Adam Schaff (1962) or Anthony Wilden (1980 [1972]; 1987), made valuable contributions to the construction of dialectical Semiotics. This article does not claim to offer any new theory. However, insofar as it will seek to point out the Semiotics hidden in Marx’s texts, it will need to make use of the knowledge already accumulated, including, if possible, established terms or expressions relating it to a dialectical approach.

Based on the principle that work is a central category in Marx, we will grow closer to this possible approach by first investigating the work as a semiotic activity. To do so, we will support or possibly suggest adaptations in the already established literature by starting with an already referenced Marxian extract.

Semiotic Work

Signs, either in sensitive forms of acoustic images or visual, tactile, aromatic or olfactory, are produced through human activity of communication. Rossi-Landi was to identify this activity as linguistic work : “The word as a unity of signified and signifier is a product of linguistic work, and its use is an ulterior *linguistic work*” (Rossi-Landi 1985 : 92).⁵

Umberto Eco will summarise the relationship between signification and work in his theory of sign production : “To produce signs implies labour, whether these signs are words or commodities [...] Semiotics of the speech must be able to identify, according to possible codes, the labour that presides over the sign’s production” (Eco 1981 : 170).⁶

Let us, for example, look at the shop floor in any factory. Let the workers be the letters *b* and *c* in Fig. 1. Even if they are seeing each other, and some moving in relation to others’ movements and possibly needing to exchange some idea about the task underway, this interaction (*b... c*) is mediated by some code (*A*) that configures and defines the task in progress in the factory’s own jargon. Interaction between them is determined, conditioned, limited by this relation that each and everyone establishes with this code, whether subjectively, since they have already mentally internalised this code due to training and constant repetition, or objectively by some other means of communication (handbooks, panels) or even by speaking or watching supervisors and managers.

In this environment, say, a worker sees in a machine panel a red light emission cut out against a somewhat amorphous background (screen glass, machine’s metal contours, etc.) in form <160>. The worker, we know, instantly sees the number |160| that, for them, means /temperature/ and may also mean /right/ or /wrong/, /there’s a fault/, etc. The form reverts to the material’s status processed in the machine, or rather, at a moment, therefore, a segment in time and space where this material is. But it refers to this material, depending on the idea or concept that the worker also has of the actual material, considering their objectives at that moment in the work process and in their overall working and living relations. Form |160| expresses, for them, a certain mental *content*. They *interpret* this relationship as /good/, /bad/, /calm/, /attention/ and so on, depending on the codes that they master socially and the actions that should or should not be taken in the circumstance. We would say, having adopted Hjelmslevian terminology, which in fact is the basis of Umberto Eco’s (1976) theory of codes, that |160| is the *form of expression* of the *form of content* /temperature/ together with some other meanings and significations produced by the worker in this relationship.

The form of content is not an inherent property of the material : this could be its substance, that is, the basis of matter-energy from where it is taken. The form of content is a concept, an idea, how the worker – subject in this relation – learns the state of matter and thereby shapes the state of matter (via instructions downloaded into the machine). The concept, in turn, is specific to this factory context : if the worker shouts “160!” to another colleague, they do not need to complete the sentence, the listener already knows the temperature of the material at any given moment. An outsider wouldn’t understand a thing... That is, in the worker’s mind, the form of content is given by a typical *cultural unit* of this subculture, in the concept of Umberto Eco (1976).⁷

As Robert Escarpit explained, the sign “can be legitimately defined as the perception of a variation in energy denoting something other than its own existence” (1991).⁸ This is the case of our example : |160| is a light emission that, due to its specific form, denotes a /number/, hence /temperature/, and may connote /condi-

tions of the material or machine/, etc. It socially (culturally) establishes a relation between form of expression and form of content, but a relation that only exists because it is *interpreted* by a subject's social mind, in this case the worker. Since the sign is taken from a code (*A*, in Fig. 1), it becomes a source of another relation, at another level : the *semiotic relation*. Here the interpretant (*I*), for instance, the factory worker's mind, is linked to more specific cultural and subcultural circumstances and contexts (*X*), including their own household, ideological and social environments. Given this environment, there will also be a well-defined code linking the relations of the forms of expression (*Fe*) with the forms of content (*Fc*), by which meanings can be attributed to the reality as perceived by their pertinent cultural units (*Y*) : "temperature", "task", "boss", "machinery", "shop floor", also "beer", "football match"...

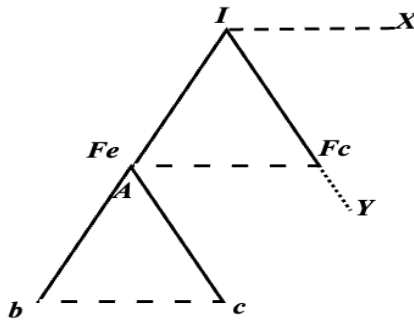


Figure 1 - Semiotic Relationship

Semiotic work implies identifying, processing, selecting, organising and communicating the pertinent elements of a certain code, in its contexts and circumstances, just as the worker did, in our example above. In a *given sign-situation*, as defined by Schaff (1962), the message content in the relation *Fe/Fc* can be interpreted by the worker because they are able to identify, first, the internal organisation of the elements constituting the form of expression, or its *syntax*, and second, almost always the relationship between those elements and their potential meanings, or its *semantic*. Thus, the worker will extract or interpret the pragmatic codes dimension that presides the sign-situation⁹ : /good/, /fine/ or /we have a problem here/, etc.

So the pragmatic dimension of the sign performs, consciously, barely consciously, sometimes unconsciously, any code according to the signs or sign systems more or less already predicted under the concrete circumstances of the semiotic work. It expresses the effectively consolidated choice, in each situation, given a set of choices potentially offered by the syntax-semantics structure of the employed code and, for this reason, already previously interiorised in the interpreting mind. It so happens then that no sign or even a sign system can have any absolute value or meaning. *Signification*, or practical effectuation of the syntax-semantics code, will be that produced in the actual implementation act, in the concrete circumstance

of this effectuation. For this reason, Vološinov would say :

The meaning of the word is determined entirely by its context. In fact, there are as many meanings for a word as there are contexts of its usage. At the same time, however, the word does not cease to be a single entity; it does not, so to speak, break apart into as many separate words as there are contexts of its usage. The word's unity is assured, of course, not only by the unity of its phonetic composition but also by that factor of unity which is common to all its meanings. How can the fundamental polysemanticity of the word be reconciled with its unity? To pose this question is to formulate, in a rough and elementary way, the cardinal problem of semantics. It is a problem that can only be solved dialectically. (Vološinov 1973 [1930] : 79-80)

Discussing the relationship between production and consumption, Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, would say something similar : "A garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house; thus the product, unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, *becomes* a product only through consumption" (Marx 1973 [1939-1941] : 25).

Consumption gives practical signification to the possible meanings of production : the garment will only be "real" if worn; and the house, only if lived in. In the wardrobe, the garment will be a potentially significant syntax-semantics relationship, a relationship whose cuts, drawings, colours and support in cotton, linen, or some other material, will only actually communicate some contents about its owner if it is worn at any time, as determined by the more or less tacit – pragmatic – dress codes.

Either through the spoken or written human language, or through images, objects or gestures, all mediation processes, because socially coded as such, are expressed through signs. Sign is some material object that society, given its culture, recognises as an *instrument* that meets its needs to communicate its own ideas or concepts of its relations in its natural and social environment.¹⁰ The sign is the *Fe/Fc unit*, but this unit is a sign because it is in place of something for someone, as Peirce defined (1931-1935) : the social subject that interprets it (*I*) as such because they also have an image of the sign in their own mind. The sign is not an object outside the subject, or an ideal concept in the subject's mind, but just *mediation* between the subject and their objective reality, mediation given to them by the object to which their culture assigns semiotic properties. As perceived by Marx : the capitalist culture assigned semiotic properties, in the *commodity-form*, to goods that, in principle, should be nothing more than useful objects for everyday life in society.

Semiotic Labour in Marx's Words

We can understand how Marx perceived the semiotic nature of human work from this passage in *Capital* :

We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of

form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more close his attention is forced to be. (Marx 1995-1996 [1867] : 127)

This example of the architect is handy since consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or tacitly, we act guided by some *design* that takes shape in our mind when action is proposed. Human work is conducted through the semiotic map of its thoughts and ideas. The image that forms in its mind can be directly transferred to the act of shaping some matter through our arms, hands and simple tools, or may first be translated into figures on paper, three-dimensional models, texts, mathematical formulas, computer codes, *semiotic materials* based on what, apparently guided by them, will be the material transformation. In Marx's time, manufacturing, even mechanised, was immediately bodily, not informed by papers or control panels. The relation and semiotic mediation, by words or gestures, could seem to him and any other observer as natural as breathing and, therefore, almost go unnoticed – just like breathing. But since the end of the 19th century and even more so during the 20th century, semiotic mediation was now also explicitly objectified and registered : messages written on notepads, notice boards, instruction handbooks, kanban cards, control panels seemingly to be the determinant source of shop floor labour; hence an object of study of the semiotic investigation.¹¹

When undertaking semiotic work, according to Eco (1976), we should consider the required mental and physical work and the material to be transformed, both also being functions of the relations immediately given or otherwise between the action and some code, and the articulation modes of the syntax components.

There may be almost no mental and physical work if we are faced with images or chats, or even quite demanding and stressful if we are undertaking some creative, innovative activity, such as, for example, writing this academic paper..

If the pragmatic effectuation of the code expresses habitual and immediately recognisable images or chats, as in the case of the above manufacturing work, work occurs through *replicas* of an established model. In our everyday chats, we are normally replicating given models, both syntactically and semantically and even pragmatically. But there may be cases where an occurrence does not immediately recall any established model. This will happen almost always in semiotic innovations or inventions, such as, for example, in cases of artworks that are set to break with established aesthetic paradigms. These situations require from the interpretant strong mental and physical effort in producing meanings and significations. We would say that in the case of replicas, work is *redundant*, since its degree of uncertainty is almost zero, or the wordings, by definition, are very predictable. In the case of semiotic inventions, work is *random*, that is, with a low predictability and high uncertainty rate (Dantas 2007; 2017).

Since it tends to be done within the limits of a given known code, the redundant

semiotic work may eventually be measured, considering the syntax probabilities of occurrence of the events. The more these events can be limited to simply binary mental operations, such as /yes/ x /no/, /right/ x /wrong/, for example, in labour industrial contexts, the more possible it would be to quantify the implemented semiotic activity. On the other hand, precisely because the act of creation implies crossing the code's frontiers at the edge to start a new code, the inventive semiotic work will be difficult, even impossible, to measure *a priori*. This possibility or otherwise of measuring the semiotic work or labour also implies its control over *time*. Highly redundant labour may have its time measured and controlled. Work with a low redundancy rate and high uncertainty is hard to control and measure with regard to execution time. In this case, as we well know, we can set "goals" promise "deadlines" but it is not uncommon for us to finally be missing 5% to finish the last 5%...

Surplus Value and Semiotic Labour

Now, let us consider, in a textile factory, the material that is found in the form identified by the name |cotton|, which must give way to a new material in the form identified by the name |fabric|. During this transformation, the worker (social and collective) has the process in his "imagination before he erects it in reality". The worker knows, before it has happened, that at the end of the process, instead of <cotton> there will be <fabric>. In fact, they know the nature and some meanings of the |fabric|, how many tons, width, thickness, colours (if the process includes dyeing or printing), work time, etc. The final form of <fabric> in which the <cotton> was transformed was already "ideally" in the workers' mind. During the process, this subjective form was *objectified* in the new product, that is, was transferred to it, posited in it and became its form.

But if the image of the object were *printed* on the product, this image would not disappear from the worker's mind and would be stamped in their memory. They can continue reproducing it as often as they wish in renewed work processes. In other words, while the original material form of |cotton| and corresponding significations have disappeared, the original material form of the "image" or "idea" has not. As the material of the original |cotton| could not be used again since it is now already |fabric|, and more |cotton| must be procured to continue producing |fabric|, the original material of the "idea" could continue being used as long as a new shipment of <cotton> arrives to produce new tons of <fabric>. If the productive consumption of the <cotton> material implies dissolving the forms and even, partly, the composition of its chemical-physical substrate, the productive consumption of the "idea" of |cotton|, that is, of /cotton/ in its sociocultural meanings and significations, does not dissolve its substance nor its forms of expression and content as images, words, and skills. The work may even have been added with new images and skills during the process. The worker lost no neuron while working and probably gained new brain connections formed by their new experiences. If this memory is also recorded in books or manuals with drawings, formulas, guidelines, instructions, or in computer systems and hardware control panels, they would also remain practically the same, perhaps only slightly worn, but yet being

reusable again and again. The *utility* of <cotton> may only be consumed by losing its original qualities for some new quality. It cannot be reused. But knowledge, whether semiotically registered in the mind or in some external support (books, control panels and so on), does not necessarily lose the *utility* through usage and often gains more quality as long as it is used.

Let's say that for four hours a day the worker (social and collective) transforms 10,000 kilos of <cotton> into so many others of <fabric>. Of course, to do so the worker needs to be physically fit : their pay for the time spent in producing 10 tons of <fabric> will help them procure food, clothing, housing and some entertainment. The worker could, then, spend the rest of the day sleeping or doing many other semiotic activities : dating, chatting and drinking with friends, reading or writing a book, painting a picture... or continuing to supply labour to transform another 10,000 kilos of <cotton> into another 10,000 kilos of <fabric>, in some factory.

The utility of the workforce, for whoever procures it, in the case of the entrepreneur, is its capacity, competence, skill, willingness, know how, physical conditions to produce or process semiotic material in the contexts and circumstances of the production process. For whoever sells, that is, the worker, their labour force has only one utility : that can be changed for some other commodity, in the case of subsistence goods to be procured with the wage. As in any trade of commodities, here the worker also sells this specific and exclusive commodity of their own for an *equivalent* commodity since they would need four hours to buy rice, beans, other provisions for themselves and their family, pay rent, buy clothing, and entertainment on days off. However, the entrepreneur procured their use-value, the semiotic material that their mind and body can process not only for four hours but for a whole day, or at least while the energy in their body is not completely dissipated in the form of fatigue. This limit, if the laws and customs do not prevent it, can be reached after 10, 12 or even 14 hours of factory labour.

This difference between the value of semiotic use of labour and the exchange value of the substrate material (the body) of this special commodity was called surplus value by Marx. He perceived that capital was earned precisely from that time of the worker, before being available to freely exercise his other semiotic skills, beyond that was necessary dedicated to reproducing his body's energetic-material conditions (Marx 1995-1996 : 180-181 *et passim*). This expropriation of the time that was semiotically released from the immediately productive labour, that human beings could possibly enjoy in the pre-capitalist societies, is the means by which capital began to exploit labour while, paradoxically, the worker was said to be "free" from slave or servile relations of domination. This was possible because this "free" worker needed to have access to land or machinery to be able to work. This access would only be granted if he agreed to stay working for the land or machinery owners for as long as his body endured the work, thereby setting the semiotic models registered in his mind (Peirce would say "types") to produce as many as possible equal material replicas (Peirce would say "tokens") throughout the day. Each replica would become the commodity whose value, as we will see below, is the synthesis of its signification for society and the average social time of labour used in replicating its signifier material in series.

Semiotics of Production and Consumption

Marx wrote:

Production, then, is also immediately consumption; consumption is also immediately production. Each is immediately its opposite. But at the same time a mediating movement takes place between the two. Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter's material; without it, consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for the products the subject for whom they are products. The product only obtains its last finish in consumption. A railway on which no trains run, hence which is not used up, not consumed, is a railway only *δυνάμει*,¹² and not in reality. Without production, no consumption; but also, without consumption, no production; since production would then be purposeless. Consumption produces production in a double way, because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. (Marx 1973 : 24-25)

Production and consumption are *immediately* related as interwoven processes in the same culture, thus processes arising from the meanings and significations of this culture. No low-cut dresses will be produced in a culture where women are mandatorily covered by veils, as well as no beef sandwiches in India where the cow is sacred. Before organising production, consumption has already pointed it in one or other direction, has already produced it *semiotically*, or as Marx usually wrote, "ideally" that is, in the Fe/Fc relation as interpreted in the social mind of the consumers.

As certain common sense might understand, this is not a one-way linear relation of the producer to the consumer like, in fact, the transmitter-channel-receptor relation as described in the well-known model of Claude Shannon (1948), strongly criticised for a time "as a paradigm of an inadequate model of communication" (Nöth 1990 : 542). Marx believes, having said that, "receptor" would also play an active role in the communicative relation. Dialectically, "emission is immediately reception, reception is immediately emission" (Dantas 1996 : 61).¹³ Escarpit (1991), in his statement "to inform is to be informed" suggested the acronym "emerec" (*émetteur-récepteur* in French) to describe this relation. In Vološinov's words :

... Any genuine kind of understanding will be active and will constitute a germ of a response. Only active understanding can grasp a theme – a generative process can be grasped only with the aid of another generative process.

To understand another person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words. The greater the number and weight, the deeper and more substantial our understanding will be. (1973 [1930]) : 102).

So the phase of the communicational process does not matter in which their "emerec" poles meet, possibly on a more receptive or transmitting basis; both will do semiotic work, both will be actively approaching the genuine or potential message produced in the same interaction.

On the other hand, this immediate relationship is also *mediated*. Production is generated by consumption, which is generated by production, since the relationship is inserted in a cultural environment that determines what will be consumed :

and what will be produced. Marx proceeds :

Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product only becomes a real product when consumed [...] Only by decomposing the product does consumption give it the finishing touch; for the product is the production not as objectified activity, *but rather only as an object for the active subject*; (2) because consumption creates the need for new production, *i.e.*, it creates the ideal internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition. Consumption creates the motive for production; it also creates the object, which is active in production as its determinant aim. If it is clear that production offers consumption its external object, it is therefore equally clear that *consumption ideally posits the object of production as an internal image*, as a need, drive and purpose. *It creates the objects of production in a still subjective form*. No production without need. But consumption reproduces the need. (*idem, ibid.*, my italics)

We note here the semiotic position of social consumption : form of content (from cultural units) of the cultural relationship. It creates the product as a semiotic object, in its image rather than a mass with volume and weight. In other words : the consumer designs and draws the product that production will manufacture or provide. Marx, in these passages, seems to talk about “prosumer” *avant la lettre*...

Marx continues :

Production, for its part, correspondingly (1) furnishes the material and the object for consumption. Consumption without an object is not consumption; therefore, in this respect, production creates, produces consumption. (2) But the object is not the only thing which production creates for consumption. Production also gives consumption its specificity, its character, its finish. Just as consumption gave the product its finish as product, so does production give finish to consumption. *Firstly*, the object is not an object in general, but a specific object which must be consumed in a specific manner, to be mediated in its turn by production itself. [...] Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer. (3) Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material. [...] The need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it. [...] Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object. (*idem, ibid.*)

The object is some segment of the reality as perceivable and understandable in subjects' minds through their cultural codes, knowledge and semiotic skill. It is the concept (form of content) that they can attribute to some segment. If consumption is a set of cultural unities that semiotically design the object for production, production would provide it as something that now occupies a specific position, in a form of exchange-value containing use-value, in space and time (and in the language of commodities). The object, from “ideal” has become substantive but without losing its cultural semiotic content and expression. The product does not consist only of its possible chemical and physical attributes that support its value (of use and exchange), but also expresses a syntax-semantic relationship to meet its genuine *pragmatic* signification in consumption that, on one hand, has idealised, designed, drawn it, and on the other, will give it its final destination. The commodity begins then as a (social) consumer design, gains its substance of value in the semiotic labour that posits it in the socioeconomic reality, completes its life cycle on being finally consumed and dissolved in its substantive materiality, but its *sign-value* will not disappear in this, as we will examine below.

Returning to the aforementioned example of clothing, production provides consumers with its object (garments). When consumers get dressed, they effectively complete the production, thereby consummating its signification as a semiotic object in the value system of society. But they are dressed because the production selected, in this same value system, some specific syntax-semantic relationship that consumers, if they do so, will have, in turn, interpreted it as a legitimate semiotic function and will be corroborating, reproducing in their cultural environment, the selection thus made. Consumption completed the production but in the forms of expression (*Fe*) and content (*Fc*) (“manner of consumption”) that production specifically offered them. This is why production not only meets a need but also produces the forms of expressing this satisfaction. The production-consumption relationship is also showing a relationship that occurs only pragmatically if both poles can meet in some sign system by which common culture can be interpreted (*I*) by the mind of the interacting subjects. (Fig. 2).

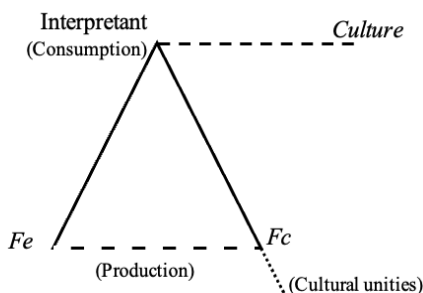


Figure 2 - Semiotics of Production and Consumption

Semiotics of Commodities

We have already seen that Marx considers a commodity as a sign, the sign of its value. Producers and consumers do not exchange products but rather values that express social relations communicated through commodities. Value is the language of commodities. Consequently, Baudrillard (1972) proposed, based on structuralism semiology, to identify the Marxian concept of use-value for the signified of commodities, and the exchange-value for its signifier. Umberto Eco (1976 : 24-26) interprets the “language of commodities” in the aforementioned passage by Marx, as the exchange-value *expressing* or mediating, for commodities, the other’s signified, for which it is exchanged. So Eco’s model separates, albeit relating to, two significant systems : use-value, a general model for any semiosis; and exchange-value, specific for the “language of commodities”. Unlike Eco, Rossi-Landi warns, mentioning an explanatory letter from Karl Marx himself (*Randglossen zu A. Wagners “Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie”* dated 1881-82), that value and exchange-value are related “within the commodity” to use-value.

In fact, Eco apparently fails to notice the *unity* of the use- and exchange-values, that the former, as we will soon see, is the content of the latter. Marx discusses in his numerous drafts for the final text of *Capital*, such as the *Grundrisse* or manuscripts dated 1861-1863, as well as in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (or *Zur Kritik...*), also published by him, perhaps in more depth than in *Capital*, the concepts of use-value and exchange-value and their threefold relation with *value*.

Value is first presented as *use-value* :

Whatever its social form may be, wealth always consists of use-values, which in the first instance are not affected by this form. [...] Although use-values serve social needs and therefore exist within the social framework, they do not express the social relations of production. For instance, let us take as a use-value a commodity such as a diamond. We cannot tell by looking at it that the diamond is a commodity. Where it serves as an aesthetic or mechanical use-value, on the neck of a courtesan or in the hand of a glass-cutter, it is a diamond and not a commodity. To be a use-value is evidently a necessary prerequisite of the commodity, but it is immaterial to the use-value whether it is a commodity. Use-value as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic form, lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy. It belongs in this sphere only when it is itself a determinate form. Use-value is the immediate physical entity in which a definite economic relationship – exchange-value – is expressed. (Marx 1999 [1859] : 6)

Use-value appears here as a reference ("necessary prerequisite") to an *economic form*, or exchange-value. Studying it as such should be a subject of some other non-economic discipline that Marx would recognise in which, today, we would call "marketing". Although, throughout his work, including *Capital*, he never ceases to consider the necessary prerequisite of the utility of a commodity to implement its exchange-value, the more detailed examination of use-value seemed to Marx secondary or even unnecessary as an object also of the economic investigation. In our conclusions, we will return critically to this point.

In order to be sold the commodity must be useful to someone, a certain utility for the buyer's sociocultural conditions : as "receptor" he will say what some specific commodity could *signify* to him. Also to be sold, the same commodity needs the vendor to have a specific, in fact, single utility : to be able to be exchanged. The seller has no attachment or love for what he is selling, will even consider the specific commodity as something completely useless if he were unable to exchange it... for money. This same commodity, then, will be the *unity* of his use-value and exchange-value, as Marx clarifies :

[...] the products [that were being produced in the factory] are changed as use-values so that a new use-value can be formed. Their exchange-values are not affected by this change in the material, and they therefore re-appear unchanged in the new product. If use-value is the product of the labour process, exchange-value must be regarded as the product of the valorisation process, and thus *the commodity, the unity of exchange-value and use-value*, must be regarded as the product of both processes, which are merely two forms of the same process. (Marx 1988 [1861-1863]) : 79, my italics)

In other words, energy, inputs, machinery were used to create a new use-value (thread was transformed into fabric; iron into steel, etc.). Semiotic labour was also used in the same process, in conditions of its force, competence, skills,

knowledge and so on. Marx makes it clear in this passage that production involves two processes that, strictly speaking “are merely two forms of the same process”. If economic theory wants to discard use-value, the commodity will be unable to fulfil the role that its capital expects, unless on its own it bears this value in the *unity* (of opposites) with its exchange-value.

This unity, now placed within the valorisation process, for this same reason takes on a life of its own. The commodity will disappear in its consumption, the inputs used in it, including labour force, would disappear in its production, but the capital, the *social relation* that commands the process, not only does not disappear but continues to grow :

Capital is a permanent, *self-multiplying* value which never decays. This *value* tears itself loose from the commodity which created it; remains, like a *metaphysical, insubstantial quality*, always in the possession of the same farmer, (e.g.), ‘for whom it cloaks itself in different forms’. (Marx 1973 : 461, italics in the original)

Marx starts by pointing to the fetishism of the commodity and also to the process that makes *value autonomous in relation to the product itself*.

In *Capital*, these semiotic mediations will be even clearer.

Let us take two commodities, e.g., corn and iron. The proportions in which they are exchangeable, whatever those proportions may be, can always be represented by an equation in which a given quantity of corn is equated to some quantity of iron : e.g., 1 quarter corn = x cwt. iron. What does this equation tell us? It tells us that in two different things – in 1 quarter of corn and x cwt. of iron, there exists in equal quantities something common to both. The two things must *therefore be equal to a third, which in itself is neither the one nor the other. Each of them, so far as it is exchange-value, must therefore be reducible to this third*. (Marx 1995-1996 [1867] : 27, my italics)

Just as a |chair| expresses a linguistic value to two speakers, two commodities will also refer to a third term, common to but distinct from both, to communicate. Marx gives an example :

A simple geometrical illustration will make this clear. In order to calculate and compare the areas of rectilinear figures, we decompose them into triangles. But the area of the triangle itself is expressed by something totally different from its visible figure, namely, by half the product of the base multiplied by the altitude. In the same way the exchange-values of commodities must be capable of being expressed in terms of something common to them all, of which thing they represent a greater or less quantity (*idem, ibid.*)

The triangle of the example is reduced to a mathematical sign :

Just as they – signs – are exchange-values of the commodity.

Here two different kinds of commodities (in our example the linen and the coat), evidently play two different parts. The linen expresses its value in the coat; the coat *serves as the material in which that value is expressed*. The former plays an active, the latter a passive part. The value of the linen is represented as *relative value*, or appears in relative form. The coat officiates as equivalent or appears in *equivalent form*. [...]

Hence, in the value equation, in which the coat is the equivalent of the linen, the coat officiates as the *form of value*. The value of the commodity linen is expressed by the bodily form of the commodity coat, *the value of one by the use-value of the other*. As

use-value, the linen is something palpably different from the coat; as value, it is the same as the coat, and now has the appearance of a coat. *Thus the linen acquires a value form different from its physical form.* The fact that it is value is made manifest by its equality with the coat, just as the sheep's nature of a Christian is shown in his resemblance to the Lamb of God. (*idem* : 33-35, my italics)

In the "language of commodities" a commodity will be an expression of another. The coat assumes the condition of "being something" for the linen : a sign. And as a sign, it is no longer relating to its specific form of use-value but rather its significant material form that, just like the word (or the "Lamb of God"), it can act as unlimited social exchanges, or social meanings, without losing form and regardless of its specific material substrate : the word [chair], for example, is still a [chair] if spoken aloud, printed on paper or seen on a computer screen. Its exchange-value, as Rossi-Landi already explained, is confined within its equivalent form regardless of its practical uses in the circumstances of enunciation. [Chair] is a form equivalent to any <chair>; but a /chair/ relates its meanings to practices, contexts and circumstances of enunciation :

The relative form and the equivalent form are two intimately connected, mutually dependent and inseparable elements of the expression of value; but, at the same time, are mutually exclusive, antagonistic extremes – *i.e.*, poles of the same expression. They are allotted respectively to the two different commodities brought into relation by that expression [...] Its function is merely to serve as the material in which the value of the first commodity is expressed. (*idem, ibid.*)

"Relative form" (use-value) and "equivalent form" (exchange-value) are "poles of the same expression" – unity. However, in an earlier passage, Marx presented us with a third element that was absent, as we have seen, in the value-sign according to Baudrillard : value.

We have seen that when commodities are exchanged, their exchange-value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use-value. But if we abstract from their use-value, there remains their Value as defined above. Therefore, the common substance that manifests itself in the exchange-value of commodities, whenever they are exchanged, is their value. The progress of our investigation will show that *exchange-value is the only form in which the value of commodities can manifest itself or be expressed.* (*idem* : 28, my italics)

"As defined above" Marx continues, the value is "mere coagulation of homogeneous human labour" : it is the expenditure of labour force regardless of the forms, conditions and qualities how this work was spent. This regardless form, *abstract*, of labour is the *substance* of value (Marx 1995-1996 : 28). The average social time, when labour is used in producing values, provides the measure that enables equalisation of exchanges. Thus, Marx points us to the substance of both the form of expression (Fe) and the form of content (Fc). Abstract labour – work that enables equalisation of values – is the substance of the expression. But the value should also have utility, has to meet the consumer's demands, needs or wishes. The substance of this content consists of useful forms of labour, or *concrete* work, namely the worker's conditions, qualities, capacities, skills, knowledge, and specialisations : in short, we already see the worker's semiotic skills.

Value – this third term of the relationship – can only refer to the use-value

being expressed by the exchange-value. We have now reached, in a purely semiotic world, the universe of expressions that relate a world of facts and things to its concepts or ideas through some material culturally endowed with meaning and significations. If the study fields of the world of “facts” “things” or “acts” can be Physics, Chemistry and even Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, not to forget Economics; and the study field of Semiotics is signs or sign systems expressing cultural unities; the study field of *critical* Political Economy will also be that of expressions and social representations through the *value* concept – mediation of cultural relations of the use-value that is expressed through the exchange-value.

The use-value may then be understood as the form of content of the semiotic relation : cultural unities that describe, represent, and are linked to consumption needs and behaviours of the capitalist society. The practical concept of clothing or garments is one, with its many variations, in western or westernised capitalist societies; it would be another in societies hardly penetrated by the European modernity in those last 200 years (for example : a large part of the Middle East, indigenous tribes that still reproduce ancient living standards, etc.). Marx wrote in *Grundrisse*:

Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. (Marx 1973 : 25)

The needs, even the most basic, are mediated by the cultural meanings and significations of use-values. But in capitalist societies, the use-value is signified as something to be exchanged and only has value (economic, hence subjective, cultural) if an expression of commercial exchange opposes it. The “language of commodities” works through social subjects, whether capitalist or worker, both fetishized by it. The interpretant, we know, according to Peirce, is also a sign, “perhaps more developed” pre-formed in the mind of the social subject. Here the interpretant, that is, the value, product and producer of the consumer capitalist culture, will interpret the use-value in the contexts and circumstances given by this culture. In all likelihood, in a *shopping mall*... The value becomes a sign of *desire*, not so much as a natural bodily need but rather a sign of belonging to this culture and its subcultures, an expression of status and recognition, identity of income, distinction, and life beliefs. Bourdieu (1979) explains.

The contexts and circumstances of capitalist consumption are expressed in exchange-value, behind which the substance of things completely and definitively disappears : the products of labour reduced to prices, money, universal alphabet of the exchange-value. Consequence :

The value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition. Turn and examine a single commodity, by itself, as we will, yet in so far as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp it. If, however, we bear in mind that the *value of commodities has a purely social reality*, and that they acquire this reality only in so far as they are expressions or embodiments of one identical social substance, viz., human labour, it follows as a matter of course, that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity. (Marx 1995-1996 : 32, my italics.)

Similarly, in the objectivity of any word, as a more typical sign example, “not an atom” enters into the objectivity of “facts” or “things” to which it refers. In |chair| as a spoken or written word, we do not find a real <chair> in the world. But our cultural codes immediately identify the meanings of the word and its possible significations. In this particular case, it means, in fact, pragmatically, an /example/, not any /chairs/ and respective <chairs> existing in the world.

The value interprets, through exchange-value, the social relations of production, especially commercial consumption, based on use-values as perceived and understood in the capitalist culture (Fig. 3).

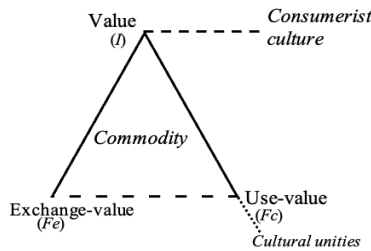


Figure 3 - The Commodity Sign

Concluding Remarks : the Spectacle Society as Sign-Commodity Society

Recognising and studying the semiotic nature of the value concept does not intend to deplete its economic analysis or anything else that it reveals regarding social relations in capitalism, especially the capital-labour relationship. What we seek is to further clarify how these relations are also determined by essentially cultural and subjective factors that, deep down, organise the social productive life as much as production dialectically shapes culture and subjectivities. As Raymond Williams has already explained, culture is an integral part of human beings, not just a mere “superstructural” reflection of their productive life (Williams 1971). Deep down, capitalism, throughout a historic process starting around the 17th and 18th centuries, but already quite advanced and clear (at least for Marx) in the 19th century, succeeded in substituting, in human everyday life in both its subsistence practices and social interaction, ethical or moral values that once presided inter-personal relations, as well as defining each person’s place in productive life and other aspects of social life, through the commodity-value. Being gave way to *having* that, in evolution, continuing until today has become *appearing*, as Guy Debord commented (Debord 1997 [1967]).

During the 20th century there was expansion in the cultural and economic

conditions of Fordism, which we learned to recognise as the “consumer society”. Capital invested in producing new needs and in the consumers’ production of these new needs. In this regard, cultural industries, another 20th century “invention” came to play a decisive role. Over time, consumption (immediately producing, let’s not forget) gradually became increasingly a socially *distinctive* activity, identity, as mid-20th century authors could already observe, namely the aforementioned Baudrillard, Bourdieu or Guy Debord.

This whole historic movement that we can only describe here in swift brushstrokes, and not forgetting the major Kondratieffian crisis of the 1970-1980 years, resulted in the current “post-Fordism” standard of accumulation, as in Harvey’s word (1990) “flexible”. A core-company commands the semiotic material labour of scientific-technological research, design, marketing, subcontracting around the world companies that will directly manufacture and do the final assembly of the products. Literature defines these core-companies as “network corporations” (Chesnais, 1996; Castels, 1999). They organise and direct the whole process, and also give a name – *brand* – to the end product : the brand has become the contemporary form of expression of the commodity-form. Automotive (Toyota, Honda, etc.), clothing (Benetton, Zara, Nike, etc.), and electronic (Samsung, Apple, etc.) industries are notorious examples of network-corporations that, in fact, manufacture almost nothing, some do manufacture nothing, but are widely dominantly prevalent in their own markets through brands that identify and express material supports actually manufactured and assembled by unknown outsourced firms. The brand is literally a fistful of “letters” expressing a social relationship of production – this very relationship of capitalism in its current advanced *spectacular* stage, as Debord (1997 [1967]) had pointed out more than fifty years earlier.

Let us observe that, in general, the prices at which these goods are sold in the stores are 1,000%, 2,000% above their factory costs.¹⁴ The final retail price seems to have no relation to its actual value (measured in labour time) but rather to a *monopolistic* relationship between the brand owner and consumer that agrees to pay these prices because they convey distinctive values that the brand seems to identify with it. Consumers would not be buying a simple object that could meet their individual or elementary social needs, nor would they be buying an object of merely instrumental or functional utility (a <car>, <pair of trousers>), but rather an object whose use-value would be, above all, aesthetic, thus expressing in this *aesthetic* form (including the brand that signs it, like an artist signs a painting), their “desires” “tastes” and “social status”.

In the capitalist world we live immersed in brands. We do not consume trousers, cars or a soft drink, nor even furniture in our homes, but rather brands that through these instrumental or practical objects say who we are, to which social groups we belong, what tastes or pleasures we share, with which social classes we hang out, and identify us. The brand has become a sign of *belonging* : social, cultural, age group, gender, professional, etc. The brand speaks for us. We consume “lifestyles” declared Isleide Fontenelle (2002).

Nevertheless, if the brand or its messages are originated in the design and marketing offices of network-corporations, they can only reach their consumers

and be enjoyed by them if in the very concrete forms of equipment, utensils and instruments. Even those so-called “services” cannot be supplied without buildings, electricity, machinery, computers, and other material instruments. However, labour that actually valorised the brand was not that of technicians and factory workers, nor was this labour close to the *final* material transformation processes. The labour that valorised the brand was that of creation and design, artistic or scientific labour, random semiotic material labour, as we defined hereinabove. At the other end, the still necessary redundant semiotic living labour tends to be expelled to the “invisible” margins of the capitalist system. This is what happens especially in the apparel and clothing industries whose working relations are too often analogous with those of slavery. But “industry 4.0” has already been announced for the near future, which will deal with eliminating it definitively. What the capitalist society will do with masses of people who will no longer be able to have any job in these miserable working conditions, is a matter that obviously transcends the boundaries of this article...

Meanwhile, as Fredric Jameson recalled, not without irony, “...there is no such thing as a booming, functioning market whose customer personnel is staffed by Calvinists and hardworking traditionalists knowing the value of the dollar” (Jameson 1991 : 270).

In order for the wheel of accumulation to continue to turn, the overall system needs to make each of us a compulsive consumer. Therefore, *sociotechnical media* are essential : radio, television, cinema, music industry, including the press less and less critical and politicised, also increasingly committed to its advertisers and with consumer public “psychology”. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1985 [1944]) commented, the media played a role of negotiating the worker’s free time, adjusting them subjectively to the redundant demands of wage labour. In other words, they also, together with food, housing, etc., comprised the necessary factors for reproducing the labour force.

The media axiomatically produce *spectacles* : films, musicals, variety shows, sports coverage, or even journalism as practised on the radio or television. On one hand, the media help bring to millions of people, at the same time and in a space that can, without exaggeration, cover the size of planet Earth (as happens, for example, when broadcasting FIFA World Cup matches). These spectacles, without the media, would only be accessible to the few that, in addition to the neighbourhood space because they live in the same city, could occupy the 200 or 300 seats of a cinema or theatre, or almost 100,000 of a sports arena. On the other hand, therefore, the media then succeed in agencying their audience of millions of people from a wide variety of social classes, income levels and cultural groups, for consumer culture and practices. The contemporary audio-visual system of production, including therein the Internet, has become the driving force of the “society of the spectacle” that has been evolving at least since the end of World War II or perhaps earlier.

Through the spectacle, brands come in contact with us. This is why the spectacle needs to appear on our TV or mobile phone screen. While we watch a football match (but could be a concert or variety show), we are being constantly

penetrated by the spectacular brands, continuously co-opted for the distinctive consumption that they suggest.

The 2014 World Cup provided FIFA with around USD 5 billion – its billing in the four years plus another month of the Cup in Brazil. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) obtained USD 4 billion over four years, with the London Olympics (FIFA, 2010; Araújo 2012). This revenue's smallest share came from ticket sales, mostly from sponsorship quotas and the sale of broadcasting rights. Who pays? Brands of beverages and food, cars, electronic appliances, banks, and airlines. Although the studies are contradictory and apparently inconclusive in terms of the impacts of a major sports event on a country's economy (Proni & Silva 2011), at least for the business of network-corporations that associate their brands with such events, the overall return must be much higher than those five billion. This return, certainly, is in sales of very concrete chemical-physical material commodities : beverages, clothing, cars; or financial and tourist services, with the entire production chain involved.

In order to have a spectacle it is necessary, obviously, to have a special kind of concrete work : *artistic labour*, meaning the productive activity of artists, sports persons, journalists, variety entertainers, advertising agents, and so on. As Ramón Zallo (1988) and Alain Herscovici (1995) have already stated, this contracted labour controlled by the cultural industry proves to be *useful* for “assistance”, “spectators” or “audience” for the empathy, performance, skill of these artist-workers while being performed, while in activity. It would not be heteronymous labour that can be consumed in the “frozen” form of the commodity. Even if recorded on a CD or DVD, or seen on a movie screen, it nevertheless continues to attract an audience or public because of its distinctive qualities, not how it could possibly be “equalled” to any other. It is concrete labour hardly reducible to the abstract, so its product – the spectacle – would be stripped of the measurement of exchange-value.

At the other end, if the “consumer” is willing to spend part of their time and, too often, also pay to watch some spectacle, it will be because that artistic labour provides them with a *use-value* : a product (spectacular) that meets some need. Someone is only willing to spend hours in a cinema or in front of a TV screen because what they are seeing and hearing – that text in which *they also do semiotic work* – contains meanings for them that could only be meaningful to them if they were *in line* with their own significant environment. For reasons whose understanding is beyond the limits of Semiotics or even Political Economy, if someone needs to cheer, vibrate, weep because of a football team; or get excited, happy or in despair with soap operas; or pay attention to the morning newscaster's culinary advice; these and other behaviours that connect the “consumer” to the spectacle's screen are only possible because it gives meaning to their daily life; somehow helping them to adjust to the surrounding society and the demands on their life in this society. As Martin-Barbero (2009) explains, referring to the popularity of television, the spectacle functions because it expresses an immediate “repetitive time” somewhat continuous, colloquial, of their own daily family life, neighbourhood, community, a daily life closest to the subject and more comforting for them. Redundant lives are fulfilled with redundant semiotic activities. Capital

has developed the mass media in order to incorporate society as a whole, to the habits that it makes (almost) all consumers.

As a product of concrete and *living* interactive labour between “artwork” and its “audience” the spectacle cannot be “frozen” in identical units whose exchange-value would be equalised for some average time of abstract social labour. Throughout history, including the history of capitalism in its earlier phases, semiotic labour was concluded in some concrete material product that was conserved in this form for the necessary or possible time, for final consumption purposes (food, clothing, tools, etc.). But after two centuries of evolutionary process and reduction of the products necessary for human life into commodity-form – sign –, capitalism made from *the actual living activity of semiotic production* its source of accumulation. In other words, semiotic labour as such, meaning labour that seeks, selects, processes to then register and communicate semiotic material; this concrete labour because its value is its own quality; this work of the scientist, artist, sports athlete, but also, in scientific-technical conditions of production, of the specialised technician with machinery and other factory or service workers; this labour that socially cannot or can seldom be reduced to the abstract; this labour has become, in contemporary capitalism, the *determinant* source of value and accumulation.

If however this random labour cannot be “frozen”, cannot be quantified in time, measured and equalised as exchange-value, would it then have lost capital as its measure of value, as Jappe (2003) or Prado (2005) suggested?

We shall answer this question, investigating the business model of the Internet’s socio-digital platforms (SDPs), namely Alphabet/Google, Facebook, Amazon and the like. They are physical-logical processing infrastructures, and information communication that permits two or more users to interact directly with each other, whether these interactions are of a commercial, professional or pastime nature. Despite their apparent differences, “social networks” or “social media” such as YouTube or Facebook; search engines such as Google; an audio-visual service like Netflix, or large “virtual” stores namely Amazon, Alibaba or e-Bay, are all alike in substance : they function as large *market places*, a “place” where buyers and sellers of goods and services meet to directly negotiate their supply and demand conditions. The SDP shareholders (basically financial capital) obtain their revenue and dividends from *monetisation of data* taken from their users, whether these users are “consumers” “advertisers” or “sellers” of goods and services.

Data are the digitally objectified result of information supplied by the users. Those who are on the potentially buying side inform, almost involuntarily and even unconsciously, their “tastes”, “desires”, “interests”, “needs”, and their living conditions (age, gender, education, health, home, work, etc.). On the selling side, intentionally, the goods and services on offer are informed regarding their sales conditions, delivery dates and so on. Algorithms are designed to link some potential buyer with some potential seller in order to facilitate a business deal to process millions and even billions of that kind of data (Dantas 2019).

Of course, information is provided through semiotic material : spoken or written words, photographs and videos. While algorithms transform this material into

data, the users, on the buying or selling side, see each other through images (*i*) on the computer screens or mobile handsets : semiotic work (Fig. 4). The selling user needs to have images of its goods and services well positioned in the small space of a screen. To do so, among the data it provides, it lists a set of words or images relating to its business. Whenever some potentially buying user adds to the algorithm some word or image included in the thesaurus of potential sellers, they will now compete for a privileged place on that screen, through an auction of key words. The algorithm itself, based on the data provided by the sellers, automatically commands the auction and organises, from its results, the display of goods or services offered on the screen of the potential buyer so that it can therefore take the final decision.

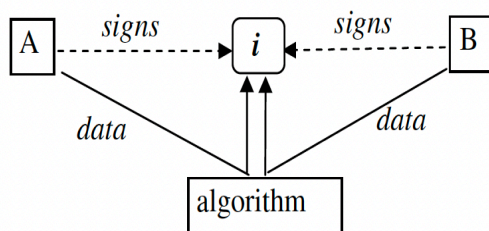


Figure 4 - Semiotic Labour in SDPs

Key words are produced by the users according to the meanings and significations in the context and circumstances of their actions or social interactions. The platform, however, is not interested in these meanings and significations except as “monetisation” potential, or exchange value. It reduces the word to a pure form of expression whose exchange-value will be posited in relation to any other equivalent word in the auction system. And for the advertisers, in their turn, the use-value, or form of content, of the word lies in the access to some potential consumer. The word, therefore, will be interpreted as *value*, as if it were a commodity. Posited by chance in the environment of the algorithm, the word is emptied of any semantic or pragmatic meaning except that to suggest and conduct some business. The form of the word is reduced to the *word-form* as far as the form of the commodity is abstracted in *commodity-form*.

Yet there will be a qualitative difference between this apparent commodity-form and the classic concept. In the concept of Marx, the commodity is an alienable object : that which acquires its use-value, becomes its effective owner, is able to freely dispose of its use. Not in the SDP : the advertiser paid for an *access right* to the consumer’s screen. It does not become a definitive “owner” of the key word. The auction is permanent because the auctioneer algorithm does not transfer (nor would be able to transfer) any ownership of the object to whoever bids. The user who paid cannot take the “word” home, as we would, for example, take a picture or rug bought at auction. So, in this case, millions or billions of people interacting

in some platform generated a use-value for paying users in the form of data, whose value, however, inalienable, will be appropriated by shareholders of the SPDs in the form of *rent*. We are leaving the economics of mercantile exchange strictly speaking, and enter a rentier economy (Dantas 2019).

At the time when Marx was alive, capital had “discovered” how to exploit, without paying, the semiotic labour of part of the population that it could employ in the factories for as long as possible. Nowadays, capital “has discovered” how to exploit, without paying, also outside the factories, or rather in any other space-time social activities, whether professional or leisure, the semiotic labour of a huge population for as long as possible, not infrequently even when sleeping (Crary 2013). The SPDs are at the front line of this advance. Facebook, for example, informs in its 2019 Financial Report that its average revenue per user (ARPU) was USD 27 (Dantas & Raulino 2020). Since the service is free, this income comes from charging the advertisers for access to the data that, also free, its billions of users worldwide *deliver* to it throughout the time when they produce in their platform, semiotic materials in the forms of texts, images, sounds or mere “likes” through their computers or mobile phones. This time may be practically the whole day. In salary relations, the employee’s work time for the boss was generally politically and legally limited to eight hours. On platforms, the only actual limit is the 24-hour day. This is also unpaid social labour valorising capital as claimed by Scholz (2013), Fuchs (2015), Jin (2015), Dantas (2019) and others.

As Debord (1997 [1967]) has already stated, capital has reached such a degree of accumulation that it has become an image. For Marx, it would be a predictable evolution: “The more the metamorphoses of circulation of a certain capital are only ideal, *i.e.*, the more the time of circulation is equal to zero, or approaches zero, the more does capital function, the more does its productivity and the self-expansion of its value increase” (Marx 1956 [1885]: 73).

However, in an apparent paradox, if political economy intended to place the use-value on the edge of its investigations, it would now need to retrace its route and attempt to understand it, in the context of fetishist consumption, as central to explaining the accumulation of rentier capital, accumulation however still based on labour as substance of value – in semiotic material labour.

Notes

1. The author thanks the reviewers for their generous suggestions.
2. Translated by the author directly from German: “*Ihr Wert muß daher auch eine von ihr qualitativ unterscheidbare Existenz besitzen, und im wirklichen Austausch muß diese Trennbarkeit zur wirklichen Trennung werden, weil die natürliche Verschiedenheit der Waren mit ihrer ökonomischen Äquivalenz in Widerspruch geraten muß und beide nur nebeneinander bestehn können, indem die Ware eine doppelte Existenz gewinnt, neben ihrer natürlichen eine rein ökonomische, in der sie ein bloßes Zeichen, ein Buchstabe für ein Produktionsverhältnis ist, ein bloßes Zeichen für ihren eignen Wert.*”

Although the references to Marx, in this article, are almost all taken from the English editions, as listed in the Bibliography (Marx 1956; 1973; 1995-1996; 1999), it was necessary in the introductory lines to resort to the original German of the *Grundrisse*. In the original German, where you read “in der sie ein bloßes Zeichen, ein Buchstabe für ein Produktion-

sverhältnis ist, ein bloßes *Zeichen* für ihren eignen Wert" (Marx 1983 : 91), it is read in the English translation : "in which latter it is a mere *symbol*, a *cipher* for a relation of production, a mere symbol for its own value" (Marx 1973 : 71). In both the translation of *Grundrisse* to Spanish (Siglo XXI Editora, Buenos Aires, 1973, translated by Pedro Scarón), and to Brazilian Portuguese (Ed. Boitempo, São Paulo, 2011, translated by Mario Duayer and Nélio Schneider), the noun "*Zeichen*" is translated as "*signo*" ("sign" in English), and "*Buchstabe*" as "*letra*" ("letter" in English). And as we shall see in some lines below, also based on the original German, Marx differentiates "sign" (*Zeichen*) from "symbol" (*Symbol*), in fact defining money as a symbol of value. For the purposes of this article, a precise translation of these terms is essential, and it does not seem, when reading the original, that for Marx, the nouns *Zeichen* and *Symbol* are interchangeable or synonymous. Hence both in the translation in Siglo XXI and Boitempo, in those passages, *Zeichen* corresponds to "signo" cognate, in both Spanish and Portuguese, of the English word "sign" not to the Portuguese or Spanish "símbolo" ("symbol" in English). I conclude that, for Marx, the commodity is primarily a sign (*Zeichen*), in the precise semiotic concept of the expression, as will be addressed in this article, although, as a sign, it may also be expressed by some symbol (*Symbol*). The author thanks Prof. Winfried Nöth for his help and comments on this issue.

3. Translated by the author directly from the original German : "*Das Material, worin dieses Symbol ausgedrückt wird, ist keineswegs gleichgültig, so verschieden es auch historisch auftritt. Die Entwicklung der Gesellschaft arbeitet mit dem Symbol auch das ihm mehr und mehr entsprechende Material heraus, von dem sie nachher wieder sich loswinden strebt; ein Symbol, wenn es nicht willkürlich ist, erfordert gewisse Bedingungen in dem Material, worin es dargestellt wird. So z.B. die Zeichen für Worte eine Geschichte haben*". (Marx 1983 : 94)
4. Throughout this text, the following conventions will be used : |word| (vertical bars) indicates a word, expression or some sign as a material-energetic expression, regardless of its possible meanings; /word/ (diagonal bars) indicates a word, image, expression, some sign in its unity of form of expression and possible meaning and /or significations; <word> (between signs < and >) indicates things, facts, acts, emotions in the world of things, fact, actions or emotions to which the sign can be referring in a concrete circumstance.
5. This and other quotations by this author were translated to English from the Brazilian edition of this work (Rossi-Landi 1985). The book combines a set of articles written by Rossi-Landi in the 1960s.
6. This quotation was translated to English from the Portuguese edition of this work (Eco 1981).
7. I have given the word "ergonsema" to these coded relations between images and their meanings in the factory labour contexts (Dantas 2007).
8. Translated to English from the French original (Escarpit 1991).
9. For this syntax-semantic-pragmatic relationship, see Morris (1994 [1971]).
10. Concerning semiotics of industrial processes see Naville (1963); Lucas (1974); Rasmussen (1986); Zarifen (1996); and Dantas (2007).
11. Although it is not the purpose of this article, we would like to insist in the materiality of the sign due to the diffusion in intellectual and political circles of the idea that there would be an "immaterial work" as well as "immaterial goods" : each and any human social activity, being semiotic, is material, whether defined as actual work or just leisure.
12. "Potentially" : written in Greek in the original text by Marx.
13. Translated to English from the original in Portuguese (Dantas 1996).
14. Of course, there is little information about these costs, generally disguised in the core-company balance sheets. One case announced in the press is the female fashion brand Diesel. At 2005 prices, the unit cost of jeans manufactured and sewn by Brazilian companies subcontracted by Diesel, was USD 12.00 to USD 23.00. The same jeans were sold in the Diesel stores around the world at prices varying between USD 300.00 to over USD 500.00, each. The seamstresses employed in any of those Brazilian companies would each earn per month between USD 150.00 and USD 200.00 (Lima 2005).

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Abstract

The Marxian concept of *value* is a cultural and hence a semiotic concept, rather than economic. Based on a scrutiny of Marx's writings, this article proposes that Marx's analysis of the commodity can and should also be interpreted as a semiotic treatise. This insight may also

be relevant to contemporary Marxian investigations concerning labour and value in capitalism insofar as the notion of value of commodities is concerned. Whereas the literature on the crisis of value theories has focused primarily on the relationship between use value and exchange-value (and abstract labour), the present paper focuses on the aspect of the sign value of commodities in Marx's theory and on how the notion of value represents of human labour.

Keywords : Value; Use Value; Surplus Value; Semiotic Labour; Marx.

Résumé

Le concept marxien de valeur est un concept culturel et donc sémiotique, plutôt qu'économique. Sur la base d'un examen des écrits de Marx, cet article propose que l'analyse marxienne de la marchandise puisse et doit également être interprétée comme un traité sémiotique. Cette idée peut également être pertinente pour les recherches marxiennes contemporaines sur le travail et la valeur dans le capitalisme dans la mesure où la notion de valeur des marchandises est concernée. Alors que la littérature sur la crise des théories de la valeur s'est concentrée principalement sur la relation entre la valeur d'usage et la valeur d'échange (et le travail abstrait), le présent article se concentre sur l'aspect de la valeur-signe des marchandises dans la théorie de Marx et sur la façon dont la notion de représente la valeur du travail humain.

Mots-clés : Valeur ; valeur d'usage ; plus-value; travail sémiotique; Marx.

MARCO DANTAS is Professor at the Communication School of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (ECO-UFRJ). He holds a doctorate (DSc) in Industrial Engineering from Coppe-UFRJ. He is a researcher in the Communication and Culture Postgraduate Programme at ECO-UFRJ and in the Information Science Postgraduate Programme at Ibict/ECO-UFRJ. Is member of the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br). Was also Planning and Budget Secretary for the Brazilian Ministry of Communication, the Distance Education Secretary for the Brazilian Ministry of Education, and member of the Advisory Board of the National Telecommunications Agency. Is former member of the Executive Board of the Celso Furtado International Center for Development and former President of the Latin Union of Information, Communication and Culture - Brazilian Chapter (Ulepicc-Br). Professor Dantas' most important books are *A lógica do capital-informação* [*The Logic of the Information-Capital*] (1996); *Trabalho com informação* [*Work with Information*] (2012); *Comunicações, Desenvolvimento, Democracia* [*Communications, Development, Democracy*] (2013); and (with Denise Moura, Gabriela Raulino, Larissa Ormay) *O valor da informação* [*The Value of Information*] (2022).

