

The Commodity as the Ultimate Monstrosity: Capitalism and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Or, Reading Marx's Capital Through Durkheim's Suicide

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In a recent work on rampage shooters (Worrell 2014) I claimed that Durkheim's *Suicide* contains a multidimensional account of alienation and that this theory is not only compatible with but also extends the Hegelian-Marxist tradition of alienation theory.

Here, I shall briefly expand upon this idea, throwing the capitalist mode of commodity production into a new conceptual light that presages not the eventual collapse of capitalism under its own weight and inherent contradictions but, rather, the destruction of civilization as it descends into a death spiral of "morbid effervescence" and self-destruction. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate that the structure of the commodity relation embodies and reproduces the four fundamental aspects of alienation found in *Suicide*. Of course, the optimistic reading suggests that the reign of contradictions prefaces the eventual, revolutionary sublation of the present into a higher, progressive unity. However, given the current death grip the mainstream parties have on governance and war, the pessimistic reading is more plausible and more than adequately reflected in contemporary culture: the US is headed toward an abyss.[1]

Durkheim is famous for his insistence on treating social facts as things *sui generis*.

Social facts are ways of collectively acting, thinking, and feeling (either fixed or fluid) that are external, coercive, and irreducible, i.e., *sui generis* (Durkheim 1982: 50-59; see also Marx [1867] 1976: 1054; Simmel 1950: 10; Weber [1930] 2001: 19).[2] Social facts are objectively real (rather than merely subjective) and confront individuals and groups as 'alien' forces existing metaphorically 'over there' and against individuals and members.[3] The ultimate social fact of the modern world is capitalist commodity production where human life is subordinated to the production of carriers of surplus value:

The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things... (Marx 1973: 157).

For Marx, a world of oppressive things confronting individuals and groups like a nightmare was a world of bourgeois alienation and fetishism (see Sayers 2011: 86-95 for a good discussion). Durkheim's terminology for this was a world transformed into monstrosities. For Durkheim, the disaggregated world produced by capitalism was one where four malevolent and destructive spirits held sway over individuals: egoism, anomie, altruism, and fatalism,

corresponding to the four ideal-typical forms of suicide. The first two were primary for modernity whereas it would appear, on the surface, that altruism and fatalism were extinct, relegated to only premodern societies. That is true on one level; however, the dialectical reading of Durkheim finds that where there is egoism, there is its opposite, altruism. Likewise with anomie and fatalism (for more on these forms of suicide and some composite formations, see Worrell 2013).

If we abstract out a portion of Durkheim's 'analytic octahedron' and focus specifically on these four ideal types of suicide we arrive at an X-shaped figure with a maelstrom at the middle, the death spiral of any society suffering from a loss of equilibrium (e.g., the American empire at the present).[4] This representation applies to a society that has undergone a process of total or partial desublimation, the destruction of the 'positive hell' of normal society and its devolution into a 'negative heaven' of warring spirits each commanding the premature death of the individuals and organizations that constitute a society.

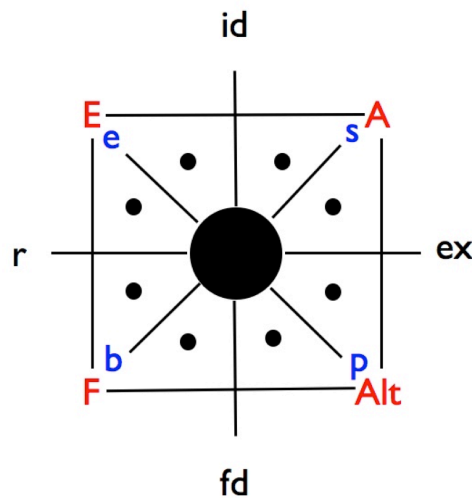


Diagram 1

The vortex at the center should be read in the light of Poe's *A Descent into the Maelstrom* ([1841] 1920) – not everything or everybody vanishes down the black hole. The liquidation or meltdown of a society is survivable and many may even appear to flourish in this 'negative heaven' of morbid accumulation, consumption, disorganization, and frivolity while others are pulled under entirely.[5]

Additional elements in this diagram can be skipped over for another time with our focus being on the corners in red and blue: the primary ideal typical forms of suicide and the corresponding forms of alienation.

- Egoism (literally, selfism) corresponds, positively, with over-individuation and, negatively, with lack of attachments to others. Egoism (E) is roughly analogous to a form of alienation known as **estrangement** (e).
- Altruism (literally, other-ism) corresponds, positively, with over-attachment to the other (or transcendental imaginary Other), and, negatively, to the insufficient development of the self and personality. In some ways, altruism intersects with "alterity" but we can set this aside for the time being. Altruism (Alt) corresponds to a form of alienation known as **possession** (p).
- Together, egoism and altruism form a solidarity axis and represent the extreme forms of dysfunction: lack of attachment and excessive attachment.
- Anomie (deregulation) is a problem of, basically, anarchy where individuals are forced to fall back on their personal resources to regulate their conduct – either impossible or contradictory. Anomie (A) corresponds to a form of alienation known as **splitting**, being divided, and being at odds with one's self (s).
- Fatalism (overregulation) represents a social form where individuals are subjugated and lacking any latitude for autonomous decision-making. Fatalism (F) corresponds to a form of alienation known as bondage, slavery, or subjection (b).

Like the duality of egoism and altruism, anomie and fatalism are terminal points on a continuum of control or regulation: lack and excess. A fresh, book-length analysis of Durkheim's classic analysis of self-destruction is sorely needed but, for the time, I will stop here at this schematic and unsatisfactory level and move on to the world of exchange value. When we shift from this well-known topology to the structure of the commodity relation, we find an analogous set of dynamics in operation.

Marx's diagrammatic analysis of the capitalist mode of production from volume two of *Capital* ([1884] 1978) is well known and can be condensed into this form for our present purposes:

M-C ... P ... C'-M'

Here, we will simply hone in on the structure of the commodity as it appears emerging from its negation as a labor product from the furnace of concrete production and its acquisition of a dual form, or, really, its sublimation and rise from the world of matter into the domain of things moral and authoritative.

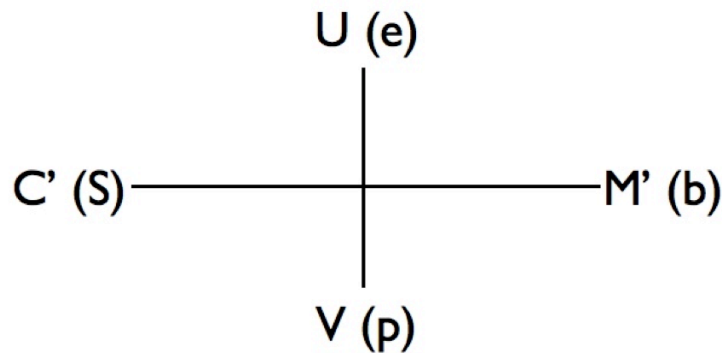


Diagram 1

The reduction of the labor product to a thing of worth splits or doubles the product into a thing that satisfies needs but also functions as a bearer or carrier of an impersonal moral substance: use-value and exchange-value.

This is very important: on the side of use-value, the “bearer” moment embodies both use and non-use depending upon the perspective of seller buyer and seller. As a use-value the commodity is also, simultaneously, a non-use-value, or, a generic raft or envelope (to the selling owner). As we can see here, anomic alienation is literally ‘built into’ the body of the commodity as use and non-use: it satisfies needs but only for those who both have money to gain access to its utility and recognize the claims of the commodity to be useful.

The other side of the split finds the commodity as a thing possessed by or possessing value. The body of the thing is reduced to a substance (abstract labor) and its magnitude (socially necessary labor time). These twin aspects of labor and time are unified under the indexicality of the price sign. These dual aspects, use and worth, are unified within the exchange relation where the commodity meets its other, the universal equivalent and, if all goes well, finds recognition and redemption.[6]

In a full-blown, postmodern consumer society based largely on credit and binging, we find the weird situation where people want things not because they satisfy real needs but because they embody an imaginary surplus, an enigmatic *jouissance* that, as soon as I pay for the commodity in order to appropriate this enjoyment, it vanishes (see Žižek's recent *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*) into the social ether, setting up, of course, the endless procession of buying things (carriers of value) only to be left with a mountain of worthless husks of utility. So, we have some poor concrete thing that is simultaneously just a ‘jelly’ of abstract labor and a thing that is useful but is rendered superfluous at the moment it is acquired by the consumer because of the loss of its moral surplus. Mundane use is not enjoyable.

When we explode the inner logic of the commodity, we find a reproduction, of sorts, of the Durkheimian topology of alienation. We have already seen the splitting of the thing, doubling into the concrete and the abstract,

utility and value as well as the splitting into use and non-use.

As a bearer of surplus value (*C'*) the commodity confronts the buyer as a social fact: external, coercive, and irreducible. As the means to the realization of surplus value, the commodity is, basically, the divinity of the modern world demanding sacrifices and obedience. We could pull material from Marx all day long to support this claim but it might be more interesting to call upon Weber, that supposed ‘individualist’ to bring the point home. Sounding positively Durkheimian and Marxist, with regard to the external facticity of capitalism, Weber said “The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action...” ([1930] 2001: 19).[7]

Together, the splitting or doubling and the resulting reduction of the capitalist life world to the status of a gulag correspond to the forms of alienation along Durkheim’s regulation axis where we find anomic and fatalistic suicide. The commodity is the contradictory and simultaneous embodiment of anomie and fatalism – a fact we find repeated into Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. But that’s not all.

The rupture between use and value also corresponds, roughly, with the dimensions of alienation we find along the solidarity axis whereby we locate the twin dimensions of estrangement and possession. The commodity as a useful thing is estranged or cut off from those that would use it, it is estranged from those that produced it, it is estranged from the owner, and it is estranged from its own universal form of being as a value (again, the contradiction between being simultaneously a use-value and a non-use-value). Moreover, as a carrier or bearer of value, the commodity is a sublime object possessed by an impersonal moral substance.

The enduring power of Durkheim’s *Suicide* resides in his mapping the primary spirits of self-destruction to reveal that everyday life, even in a normal society, is founded on a whirlpool of negative, destructive energies and their crystallizations. Their synthetic sublimations in a normal society temper self-destruction to the level of repression and sublimation – socially approved and expected forms of self-negation. When society breaks down a greater number of ‘autonomous’ individuals are free to obey new orders, issued primarily by the spirits of anomie and egoism, to destroy themselves.[8] Durkheim intersects with Marx’s analysis of capitalism in that we see that the world of free market commodity production and exchange (anarchy, egoism, class exploitation and bondage, and alterity) is a world that is, by definition, engaged in collective self-destruction. Unfettered capitalism is the road to suicide.

Endnotes

1. See as well Berthold-Bond’s analysis of Hegel and madness. I find some interesting parallels between the discussion of ‘madness’ and what we typically refer to as sociological alienation. Note also, Durkheim does in fact refer to the suicide victim as one who resembles the type who would normally be found in the care of the alienist.

2. The hyper-atomized structure of contemporary social science often produces a nihilistic gaze that sees nothing where there should be something. If society is not a thing *sui generis* and reification is not a real process then there is nothing to society but the sum total of individuals. However, by ‘thing’, we do not intend to portray society as an object in the same way rocks and planks of wood are things. Society is not a static material edifice (see Cassano 2010: 4). For example, even an entertainment style (opera, tragedy, comedy, etc.) will constrain interpretation and action. “Your capacity for self-expression will have made its mark within a construct that has been ruled by certain still live and kicking social energies” (Trow 1999: 4).

3. With Sartre, however, we would qualify this by saying that the “over there is no more than a here...” ([1960] 2004: 404) in the same way that the Lacanian “Real” is not a replication of the idealist noumenal realm but the point of failure for processes of signification, where representation breaks down (Zizek 2001).

4. The literature built up around Durkheim’s *Suicide* is quite voluminous and one is hard pressed to imagine that anything remains to be said regarding the concepts of egoism, altruism, anomie, and fatalism. Nevertheless, two interrelated features dominate the decades-long sociological commentary on Durkheim’s famous four-cornered typology (Besnard 2005) of self-destructiveness: first, these concepts are almost universally preserved in their ideal-typical purity in ways that Durkheim did not intend (as McCloskey noted as far back as 1976 – and it is still generally the case more than thirty years later) resulting in a stultification of theoretical insight; secondly, related to the previous point, not much attention has been paid to what Durkheim called the “composite varieties”

of these concepts – the simultaneous “contradictory coexistence” of oppositional forces within one and the same society, institution, class, or self. In short, Durkheim’s thought is littered with references toward these contradictory fusions of countervailing forces (i.e., in what we might refer to as the ‘speculative identity’ of contraries) whether we are interested the furtive relationship between empiricism and mysticism (1982: 74); the masked egoism of the humble servant (1982: 37); the Stoic desire to dissolve into the abyss of the infinite; Epicurean sects, and so on.

5. I also want to point readers in the direction of George Gissing’s, *The Whirlpool* (1897) that also intersects with our interests in commercial failure and suicide.

6. What is important here, and occluded, is that the commodity has a double ternary structure.

7. Of the first rank of classical theorists, who was more fatalistic than Weber?

8. Where there is “autonomy” (auto-nomy, or, self-regulation) we must locate the counter-dimension of “heteronomy” (other-nomy, or, altruism combined with fatalism) operating in the background (or unconscious). The “autonomous” individual is not a goal but a symptom of diseased, bourgeois society. As Zizek would say of the autonomous individual in capitalist society: you are free to choose so long as you make the right choice.

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