

The Arrival of Ecological Objects: Conceptions of Materiality for the Anthropocene

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The Marxist analysis of the commodity fetish follows a pattern of surface and depth. Related to this pattern is the notion of presence/absence, or, to follow Heideggerian language, of concealment and disclosure. The fetish analysis allows Marx to demystify the commodity by revealing its withdrawn reality as a social product. In Sara Ahmed's language, the Marxian fetish analysis is rooted in a critique of presence through Marx's insistence on historicity and labor within the commodity. "Marxism allows us to rethink the object as not only in history but as an effect of historical processes," Ahmed writes, "the Marxian...critique of the idea that the object is 'in the present' or that the object is 'before me'" (240). Ahmed's reading of Marxian commodity fetishism marries an analytical framework of concealment and disclosure with object-oriented analysis.

A synthesis of commodity fetishism and object-oriented ontology (OOO) proposed by Graham Harman follows. I will first analyze Marx and Engel's structural account of the commodity fetish, focusing on the concept of presence. I will then turn to an analysis of Harman's quadruple object, paying careful attention to the similar analytic framework of concealment and disclosure echoed in the commodity fetish. Synthesizing these seemingly divergent theoretical constructions of the object, I argue, is to infuse OOO with a critique of capitalism, while also reinstalling a robust materialism within commodity fetishism. What is at stake in the former is politicizing the withdrawn, autonomous object; what is at stake in the latter is an "updating" of Marxian critical analysis by accounting for objects in their material, environmental, and ecological complexity. Rather than argue that these two frameworks are mutually exclusive, as some critics have argued, the larger goal here is to examine how a synthesis of these two frameworks offers a robust political ecology so needed during the era of climate change.

In "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret" (Marx 230), Marx works to uncover the secret of the fetish as a mode of concealment and mystification. Marx begins the analysis by pointing to the "strange[ness]" (230-231) that arises when a distinction is drawn between the use-value and the exchange-value of the commodity. Objects in their use-value are what furnish the world. As I write, the computer has the use-value of recording text, the coffee cup holds my beverage, and the table holds these objects for my use. Indeed, Marx notes that "there is nothing mysterious" (231) about the utility of an object. What is important in Marx's discussion is that the use-value of a given object is not magically present, but instead is shaped and constructed through labor. For Marx, the fashioning of use-values through the creation of objects is an expression of our species-being. Humans produce goods derived from laboring upon the objects of nature to provide heat, shelter, food, and clothing as part of species-being (Marx 63). From the Marxian perspective, nature is our "inorganic body" (63) that we shape and labor with in order to "objectify [our] species-life" (64).

Things, however, get strange when the object becomes a commodity. The object takes on “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (231) as a commodity. The strangeness of the commodity is rooted in the commodity’s transcendence of its sensuousness. That is, commodities become fetishistic in the totemic sense — animated, lively, and seemingly autonomous. Marx writes:

It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, concerning all other commodities, it stands on its head and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (231)

It is precisely the agency of the table, expressed here as a kind of dancing, that Marx’s fetish analysis demystifies. Marx uncovers the concealed nature of the commodity as really the externalization of the social and economic relations behind the creation of the object itself. For Ahmed, the suspicious hermeneutics of commodity fetishism allow objects to arrive through the disclosure of the social relations behind the object. To look at the object in its purely sensuous features is to become blind to the productive social labor which has transformed the object into a commodity. “[Objects] take shape through social action, through ‘the activity of a whole succession of generations,’” Ahmed points out, “which is forgotten when the object is apprehended as simply given” (241). The hermeneutics of suspicion that Ricoeur identified in the Marxian fetish analysis is thus a necessary condition for exposing the social relations behind the object. The fetish analysis demonstrates that the object’s seemingly mystical qualities, such as its ability to dance, are instead the result of its socio-material conditions of production. Marx summarizes the mistaken view of the commodity fetish by stating: “there the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (233). What is fascinating here is the relation between the object’s fetish character and OOO’s construction of objects that are “endowed with a life of their own” and that enter “into relations with each other.” As we will see, OOO transvalues the Marxian fetish analysis by emphasizing the concealed nature of objects in order to re-mystify the object as an irreducible and agential object.

Marx’s plumbing of the commodity’s seemingly concealed depths, and thus erasing the mysterious agency therein, leads him to posit the labor theory of value. Objects are not vibrantly animated and do not have social relations of their own, but are instead “social hieroglyphics” (Marx 234) that distill the value of labor in their construction. By recognizing the “social character of private labor and the social relations between individual workers” (Marx 236), their mystical character disappears — the table, that is, ceases dancing and becomes reflective of the human processes that create and exchanged it. Commodities become materially grounded; Marx demonstrates that the mysterious quality of objects is actually derived from the material conditions of production that grant them value and make them exchangeable in the market. As Marx puts it, fetish analysis reveals that commodities are “material relations between persons and social relations between things” (233). What is important to emphasize in the fetish analysis is Marx’s insistence on the binary between surface/depth and presence/absence. To embrace the fetishism of commodities is, in a sense, to be content with the “surface” of the commodity rather than the “depth” of social relations behind it. Conversely, to perform the fetish analysis is to reveal the “absent” social relations that allow the table to appear as though it is dancing. As Ahmed helpfully points out, the fetish analysis allows the table to arrive in its rich

socio-historical processes: “this table was made by somebody, and there is a history to its arrival, a history of transportation, which could be redescribed as a history of changing hands” (243). Thus, Marx’s commodity fetishism allows the table to “arrive” by erasing the “depths” or “absences” that are concealed by the material conditions of its production. OOO similarly relies on the distinctions between surface/depth and presence/absence. Where the Marxist fetish analysis works toward the demystified arrival of the commodity, OOO instead emphasizes the withdrawn reality of objects outside of human perceptions and concerns. The withdrawn quality of objects, in OOOO, becomes mystical through the fundamental irreducibility of objects as such — tables, that is, seem to once again dance. OOO has different strands with minor discrepancies, but the movement is primarily derived from the work of Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost. I will focus on Harman’s Heideggerian flavored OOO as explored in his book, *The Quadruple Object*. Harman’s conception of the object begins precisely at the zenith of commodity fetishism in the Marxian perspective. The fundamental thesis of OOO is that objects are autonomous and that they withdraw from human perspective and from other objects. Harman’s approach is, on the surface, a re-fetishization of the object. Where Marx emphasizes the need to expose the human social relations that underlie the seemingly mystical character of the commodity, Harman is instead attempting to re-mystify the object by pointing out its mystical, withdrawn reality.

Harman would consider Marx to be caught in the traps of correlationism and anthropocentrism. The term correlationism is borrowed from Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* to describe how 20th-century philosophy is centralized around subject-object relations. Meillassoux defines correlationism by stating: “nothing sensible...can exist in the way it is given to me in the thing by itself, when it is not related to me or to any other living creature” (1). Correlationism is the idea that thought is always correlated with the external world, and that humans can never speak about an object from outside of human thought — to speak about nonhuman objects is to be caught within the correlationist circle. That is, to speak about something in the world is to only report its givenness to human perception rather than account for nonhumans themselves. Marx’s fetish analysis certainly falls into the correlationist circle because the goal of the fetish analysis is to uncover the social correlation between human labor and the emergence of the commodity in order to re-materialize the commodity as a socio-historically situated object. Harman’s object-oriented analysis implicitly deems the Marxian approach as one which is thoroughly anthropocentric and correlationist in its socio-economic determinism. Harman succinctly summarizes the major tenants of OOO as follows:

The two basic principles of [the] object-oriented approach are as follows: (1) objects have genuine reality at many different scales, not just the smallest, and (2) objects withdraw from all types of relation, whether those of human knowledge or of inanimate causal impact. In short, objects exist at many different levels of complexity, and they are always a hidden surplus deeper than any of the relations into which they might enter. The rest of object-oriented philosophy follows from these two points. (106)

OOO argues for an irreducible gap between data and things, wherein things always withdraw behind the data we gather about them. That is, the phenomena, or data, we receive about a thing, is never reducible to the thing-in-itself. Such a gap, Harman argues, foregrounds the limitations of human knowledge.

For example, when we think of a table, Marx's famous example, it might be understood in two distinct ways: we might reduce the table to its component parts (such as its use-value) or we might understand the table as a "thing" when it acts in conjunction with something else (such as the networks of exchange produced by capitalism). Harman calls the former process "undermining" and the latter process "overmining." The problem with both approaches, Harman argues, is that they fail to account for the way in which objects withdraw from relations as autonomous beings, and that such withdrawal occurs precisely through the tension between the object and the present expression of its qualities. OOO is therefore a critique of anthropocentric orientations toward objects. Harman thus develops a post-anthropocentric approach to objects by de-emphasizing human access as the primary way to know and engage with nonhuman objects. The main difference in Harman's approach is that there is an attempt to re-mystify the object in order to formulate a speculative realism that takes objects as materially and environmentally necessary, precisely because objects have autonomy in addition to their relations with humans and other objects. Put differently, OOO's endgame is to understand objects, in the language of Marx, "as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (Marx 233). Harman centralizes the "depth," or withdrawal, of objects as a surplus of being that is not captured through human epistemological systems. That is, the seeming "absence" of an object is actually the most profound expression of its "presence."

Harman's description of the withdrawn quality of objects follows a similar pattern of surface/depth and concealment that is central to Marx's commodity fetishism. For OOO, objects seem to dance with autonomy and agency — much like Marx's things under the spell of commodity fetishism. Harman defines objects as thoroughly autonomous:

Objects will be defined only by their autonomous reality. They must be autonomous in two directions: emerging as something over and above their pieces while partly withholding themselves from relations with other entities. (19)

There are thus a number of important correspondences between Marx and Harman. Firstly, objects in Harman's formulation have emergent properties. For Marx, exchange-value emerges out of the social relations that produce it. For Harman, however, the object's autonomy, or essence, emerges as a withdrawn reality that is more than the sum of its parts. Secondly, in Harman's definition, objects are concealed and thus do not fully present themselves in each instantiation. Similarly, in the fetish analysis, commodities are "social hieroglyphics" which conceal the labor and production needed to produce them rooted in a similar critique of presence. For Marx, commodities only appear to dance and stand on their heads because the labor theory of value withdraws from the commodity's surface. Conversely, the end goal of withdrawal in OOO is to posit an onto-epistemological status of objects that exceeds anthropocentrism and correlationism. That is, objects always have a shadow that can never be fully appropriated by humans, but can instead only be alluded to. By tracing the object's contours, through what Harman calls "allure," we begin to approach the withdrawn and autonomous thing-in-itself. While Harman's *Quadruple Object* never cites Marx, a fascinating structural parallel thus occurs between the fetish analysis and OOO's understanding of the object as never fully present.

As the title of Harman's book, *The Quadruple Object*, suggests, objects have a fourfold structure. Harman describes the fourfold as: natural objects, sensuous objects, sensuous

qualities, and tangible qualities. For Harman, an object is never purified and reduced to one of these poles. Instead, objects are in continuous tension, undergoing what Harman refers to as the “fusion” and “fission” of the different mutations of objects and qualities (102). Rather than these qualities being understood as adversarial, Harman’s position is one of complementarity and supplementarity between objects and qualities. For Harman, the real quality of an object derives from its ability to withdraw, or to become a fetish in Marx’s language. That is, the object conceals itself, only making its withdrawn presence known when it fails or breaks. Such glitches in the use-value of objects reminds us that there is a reservoir of being not accessible or present to us — this is the “withdrawn” nature of the object that Harman borrows from Heidegger. Harman’s instance on the relationship between the natural object and its withdrawn character approaches the object much like Marx approached the commodity. The significant difference is that Harman embraces a Heideggerian attitude of letting the object be in its dwelling, while Marx approaches with a suspicious hermeneutics intent on the demystification of social relations that make the object seem mysterious.

For OOO, sensuous objects are grounded in Husserl’s eidetic analysis of objects, which posits an underlying essence of the object that can only be approached through imperfect means. Harman argues that “the eidetic features of an object can never be made present through the intellect but can only be approached indirectly by way of allusion” (28). Notice that the sensuous object derived through Husserl’s eidetic analysis is also a moment of withdrawal and concealment, requiring what Harman calls “allure” as an indirect appropriation of the sensuous object. In short, Harman’s approach rests upon a critique of presence — the object is always in surplus and shadowy ontological darkness. Timothy Morton, a fellow OOO scholar, summarizes this point well:

To this quite Aristotelian view, OOO extends Husserl’s and Heidegger’s arguments that things have an irreducible dark side...Harman simply extends this irreducible darkness from subject-object relationships to object-object relationships. (165)

Let us take a step back and account for the sensual aspects of Harman’s quadruple objects. Sensuous objects and sensuous qualities for Harman are always radically specific. In OOO, the blackness of a coffee cup is different from the blackness of the night sky or the blackness of pencil lead. Each sensuous quality partakes within the object in a specific and localized manner, as Harman argues: “I never encounter black as an isolated quality, but only as the black of ink or poison, a black infused with the style of these objects” (Harman 77). Harman refers to the “bridge” (77) between the object and its sensuous qualities, implying a unification and focalization of a given sensuous quality within the object. Notice that even the qualities of objects withdraw, and are, in a sense, autonomous with a vibrancy of their own.

Harman thus describes the quadruple object’s breakdown as follows: “time (SO-SQ) as in Husserl’s adumbrations, space (RO-SQ) as in Heidegger’s tool-analysis, essence (RO-RQ) as in Leibniz’s monads, and eidos (SO-RQ) as in Husserl’s eidetic intuition” (99). These are the central tensions that make up the quadruple object, modified from Heidegger’s fourfold, composed of man, divinities, earth, and sky (360) discussed in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” However, where Marx’s materiality is social, Harman’s materiality is object-oriented. That is, Harman’s withdrawn object is the exact type of fetishistic mystification Marx works to dispel.

What is essential to notice in this brief overview of Harman's position is how objects are never exhausted in the four tensions of the essence, space, *eidos*, and time. Objects only reveal two of their features in tension with one another, almost as if objects have a Janus face. OOO's insistence on the autonomy of objects is thus built directly into their structure through a robust critique of presence and an emphasis on withdrawal as a means toward autonomy. By rejecting anthropocentrism and correlationism, objects themselves never exhaust one another and never fully experience one another in their relations. As Levi Bryant's provocative title states, OOO ultimately reaches a kind of "democracy of objects" where each thing is autonomously irreducible as an object. Harman uses the metaphor of fire and cotton to exemplify this point. When fire and cotton interact with one another in the act of burning, both are irreducible to one another, even as they seemingly fuse: "Perhaps fire does not think about the cotton that it burns...but the fire still makes indirect contact with the cotton, since direct contact is impossible" (121). Perhaps OOO is thus a kind of secularized mysticism that works to posit the autonomy of objects. We have now arrived at the most important and radical insight of OOO, namely that the Kantian noumena is a fundamental character of all relations (Harman 137). Harman's central claim, of course, stems from classifying the fundamental nature of objects as withdrawn, autonomous, and irreducible to both human and object relations. In this way, Harman and OOO have radicalized the Heideggerian imperative of letting things be in their dwelling by thinking about how objects "dwell" with one another outside the realm of human access.

As is now clear, the Marxian fetish analysis and OOO share the heuristic of surface/depth, but that such a heuristic is mobilized toward radically different political and metaphysical ends. Marx develops a suspicious hermeneutics that demystifies the commodity's "agency" in order to expose the labor theory of value and social relations behind a given object. OOO develops a secularized re-mystification of the object as a social and ontological entity its right. Both, however, are rooted in a critique of presence and employ remarkably similar analytical models to examine the object. This notion leads to a series of questions: is the OOO object a fetish object in the Marxist sense? In other words, does the OOO object actively work to conceal the capitalist modes of production through which it arrives? If this is the case, what is the broader relationship between OOO and capitalism? Conversely, does the Marxian analysis lead to an incomplete consideration of the commodity as a "real" object? Similarly, how might irreducible objects like ecosystems complicate the socio-economically determined framework of commodity fetishism?

What follows are only provisional answers to these important questions. OOO has a notable omission when considered from the Marxian lens — capitalism. Harman's discussion of the quadruple object is rife with actual, produced commodities in addition to imaginary and natural entities. The implicit claim in OOO is that a commodity, such as a computer, has the same withdrawn quadruple structure as a natural object like a tree, or an imaginary object like a unicorn. As OOO insists, it is not that all objects exist equally, but that all are equally objects (5). In OOO, however, objects seem to be unconnected to the historically specific material conditions that brought them into existence. Thus, in conceiving of a computer as a real object, OOO can account for the emergence of the computer as withdrawn and more than a sum of its parts, but cannot account for how the computer arrives through historically specific processes. That is, OOO does not account for the rare earth materials needed for the computer's production, nor the situated

knowledge of human labor required to assemble the computer, nor Apple as a corporate object that disseminates computers across the globe, nor the ecological impact of the energy consumed by such computers. The arrival of the computer in OOO is seemingly one of fetishistic blindness — there is no discussion of the sociopolitical implications of the object's arrival. OOO instead champions the onto-epistemological and the fundamental strangeness of the object over the social and political impacts that such strangeness ushers into the world. Not recognizing the labor power that worked to generate a computer allows consumers to negate responsibility towards the objectified environment and objectified workers who, through their species-being, shaped the computer for commercial exchange and personal use. Thus, reinstalling a sense of “social hieroglyphics” into OOO's construction of the object can help to historicize and politicize the object beyond the radical onto-epistemological stance of autonomy and agency central to object-oriented approaches.

OOO would most likely rebut that including Marx's fetish analysis would inevitably lead back to the correlationist circle. To speak of the object as a commodity, OOO argues, would inevitably require us to speak about its anthropocentric givenness and instrumentalization toward human ends. In my view, at least, the problem with stopping an analysis of objects at their withdrawn ontological autonomy is that such approaches are purposefully blind to the object's troublesome arrival in its historical and sociopolitical vibrancy, and, by extension, to ascribe blame and responsibility for the ecological and social unintended consequences that such objects usher into the world. OOO should thus embrace Marx's fetish analysis in order to account for capitalist modes of production, while not anthropocentrically privileging subject-object relations as the only analytically important perspective. Making the object arrive through Marx's fetish analysis allows part of its withdrawn nature to be disclosed without thereby ignoring the other tensions that work to make an object so much more than simple social and economic relations. To put it differently, OOO can use Marx's fetish analysis as another withdrawn element of the object that comes into tension and presence from different perspectives. In this way, the object arrives, but is never reducible to the commodity or other anthropocentric forms.

Perhaps the accusation above regarding OOO's seeming political blindness concerning capitalism is too heavy-handed. After all, Timothy Morton makes an explicit connection between OOO's object-oriented stance and the ecological crises of the Anthropocene (or, perhaps for our focuses, the Capitalocene). OOO theory argues that recognizing and valuing the withdrawn nature of an object moves objects beyond human utility, and thus allows for ethical and social frameworks that expand the political and the social to include the nonhuman. Such an expanded democracy of objects, Morton argues, is crucial in responding to the proliferation of nonhumans during the age of climate change. That is, to equate objects with human utility presents a mechanistic view of the world that will not allow for a truly political and ethical society that includes nonhumans as autonomous agents (Morton 184). For Timothy Morton, emphasizing the withdrawn in objects allows for a more potent form of ecological thought. Morton argues that “clinging to the palpable, we end up with faceless Nature, a symptom of how thinking has damaged Earth. OOO allows us to think deep down [into] things” (185). While Harman expresses no such ecological thought within *The Quadruple Object*, his teacher, Heidegger, expressed environmental concerns in essays like “The Question Concerning Technology.” For Heidegger, we must become sensitive to the fourfold construction of the thing, through the saving power of art, in order to combat the “enframing” of science and technology. He writes:

Modern technology, as a revealing that orders, is thus no mere human doing. Therefore, one must challenge that man orders the actual as standing-reserve following the way it shows itself. That challenging gathers man into ordering. This gathering concentrate man upon ordering the actual as standing-reserve. (324)

OOO takes up the challenge of Heideggerian “enframing” and works to ecologically “order” the world by granting nonhumans a form of autonomy. To combat “enframing” as a “setting-upon” nature that “orders” the material world into the “standing reserve” of capitalism, OOO presents a new way of “ordering” the world outside of anthropocentric instrumentalization. OOO’s politics seem geared towards ecological insights, which are equally crucial for critiquing of capitalism, even when questions of ontology seem to take precedence over social issues. Synthesizing Marx and Harman allows for a robust framework to understand the social and political contours of nonhuman in the era of climate change, without anthropocentrically reducing objects to their modes of production and social relations.

Of course, the Marxist fetish analysis has been a catalyst for social and political change by exposing and challenging the social and material constructions that codify individuals into particularly harmful institutions and discourses. By challenging the seemingly mystical authority of capital through the fetish analysis, Marx demonstrates that the commodity is neither natural nor essential. The fetish analysis ultimately allows for a critique of larger social structures by demonstrating that what seems natural is instead socially constructed, and is therefore replaceable. As Marx writes in the Theses on Feuerbach: “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it” (101). Importantly, the Marxian emphasis on praxis and revolution can benefit OOO attempts to gather political will around environmental issues.

Regarding OOO’s contribution to Marxist suspicious hermeneutics, I take inspiration from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” He writes:

[...] hermeneutics of suspicion [...] is an effective critical tool in dealing with national and global formations of domination. But I do not find it adequate in dealing with the crisis of global warming. First, inchoate figures of us all and other imaginings of humanity invariably haunts our sense of the current [climate] crisis [...]. Second, the wall between human and natural history has been breached. (349)

Chakrabarty’s view of suspicion is that it needs to be updated for the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene challenges how we understand humanity as autonomous individuals, and, most importantly as sovereignly removed from nature. I suggest that OOO’s emerging onto-epistemic framework, which emphasizes the withdrawn quality of nonhumans, recognizes the extent to which objects co-constitute human structures (like capitalism) and thus updates the hermeneutics of suspicion for the era of climate change. Specifically, OOO can critically account for nonhuman objects like climate change, energy production, and waste in their material specificity, rather than reducing such objects to socio-economic relations. Marxist suspicious hermeneutics can thus begin to address the contemporary ecological crisis by incorporating OOO’s insistence upon nonhuman autonomy. In sum, Marxism adds to OOO in developing a hermeneutic approach that allows objects to arrive in their specifically situated sociopolitical history. OOO, in turn, acts as a counterbalance to Marx’s fetish analysis by refusing to immediately reduce objects to anthropocentric frameworks. Synthesizing Marxian hermeneutics and OOO epistemologies ultimately

allows for an ontologically capacious political ecology in which more inclusive collectives, politics, and societies of humans and nonhumans may be formed. In short, such a synthesis might be the foundation for a modern political ecology so needed during the era of climate change.

In conclusion, if critics stick with the purely suspicious hermeneutics, then we can never begin to spark a revolution against climate change and the harmful effects of the Anthropocene. Such a failure results precisely because theory will be permanently blinded to the reality and exigency of nonhumans in the era of climate change. Conversely, applying Marxian hermeneutics to OOO allows objects to arrive in their specific socio-historic contexts and thus allows critics to examine issues of power and domination that are central to the withdrawn autonomy of the object. My suggestion follows that of Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, which argues that becoming attuned to the "thing power of commodities," or the hybrid fusion of ontology and politics, allows critics to examine the natural-cultural reality and exigency of nonhuman things (108). Synthesizing Marxism and OOO, rather than casting them as diametrically opposed theoretical frameworks, contributes to a kind of political ecology that accounts for power and sociopolitical relations of objects, while maintaining the irreducibility of nonhumans as withdrawn objects. Ultimately, the politics of Marx need to be merged with the onto-epistemology of OOO to answer the call of the Anthropocene.

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