

The Orchard of the World is Left Out to Rot

Commodities have Consequences

“The crops are all in, and the peaches are rotting,
the oranges are piled in their creosote dumps”

- Woody Guthrie, *Plane Wreck at Los Gatos*

In the 1930s and 1940s, as Americans starved to death, the US government followed a policy that paid farmers to destroy their crops. Fields of corn were burned, and pork was used as fertilizer. The reasoning behind this was to aid farmers in the midst of the great depression. Prices run partly on supply and demand, so destroying the supply would theoretically raise prices (Powell). These policies had lots of opposition, John Steinbeck protested them in *Grapes of Wrath* and Woody Guthrie wrote a song specifically protesting the waste of good food. The logic of prices was seen as horrific, and activists opposed using the market's worst features in such a way as a form of “relief” (Poppendieck). Today, the expansion of the market over society has made these scorched corn fields more like a burnt kernel, as waste created by the profit system has reached unprecedented levels. But this waste has impacted society in more ways than just hunger, it has devalued work itself, and has made cheap the sweat of millions.

Waste has lots of definitions, but for the purposes of this essay, we define it as an object that has failed in its purpose. A peach left out to rot is wasted, it has failed to be eaten, and a discarded (yet usable) box is likewise a failure and a waste. In our society, waste is rampant, over 1/3 of food produced is wasted, and it is* of great importance in examining the effects of waste to likewise examine how waste comes into being. I have worked at a fairly large farm stand since the end of summer. We sell (and waste) pretty much all the types of produce that are grown in

Western Washington. In the summer going into fall, we sell *lots* of plums, but demand slows by October. In September, our plum display sells out every day, so the plums are always fresh. In October the display does not sell out everyday, but it still sells, so we still must fill it. People will not buy from a small display, for they like to see things look plentiful, and if something looks scarce it will not sell at all. Thus to sell any plums, we have to put out more plums on display than we sell. Plums can stay good for a long time if kept refrigerated, but we can not refrigerate our store, for customers do not like being cold, and it is prohibitively expensive. When we have more plums than people buy, the ones left behind sit out all day in the heat, and often the next day too, and they start to go bad. The plums that could have been kept good until November had they been refrigerated, must go out and rot to make the other plums sell. The aesthetic of plentifulness, valued when plums are a commodity, causes plums to go to waste. Likewise, we sell enough cauliflower to justify selling it. But when cauliflower is left out, it starts to turn brown. The brown spots on cauliflower are not mold, they are like the brown on apple slices, one* can eat them just fine, but they do not look the way a cauliflower “should”. When it comes to customers, the image of the cauliflower is incredibly important to selling the cauliflower. People expect cauliflower to be pristinely white, so we have to progressively cut the brown off the cauliflower, until it is too small, then no-one wants to buy it because small produce has a bad image as well. The same thing happens to lettuce, leeks, carrots, beets, cabbage, cucumbers and zucchinis. In the fruit world, a bruised pear or peach ends up thrown away, even bakers will not bake with bruised fruit if they can buy pristine fruit, even though the end result is the same. Commodities have aesthetic expectations, for they are images as much as objects, and this visual aspect is fine for a smartphone or television show, but produce is organic, and fails these

expectations all too frequently. When it does fail, it must become waste because no-one will buy an imperfect commodity.

All the way back in the 19th century, Karl Marx made an important observation about commodities. He observed that commodities are linked to the workers who create them, but the commodities hide this, and we end up viewing certain qualities as characteristic only of commodities when in fact they are originally qualities of labor (Marx). This logic is incredibly important in discussions of waste. When waste is looked at from a teleological perspective, when we view it as an object that has failed its purpose, we find that laborers are impoverished from this waste. Labor also contains teleological qualities, for the point of a given task is ultimately to produce a product. When this product is wasted, it is not only the product that has been wasted, but *also the labor*. Labor is wasted when we waste our commodities. Every minute spent putting plums out to rot is a wasted minute. Every hour spent in the fields growing cauliflowers is wasted if the cauliflowers go brown. Every day spent packing pears is a day for nothing when those pears are bruised. This waste has effects on workers greater than any effect the waste of the commodities has. When we work, we put a part of ourselves into what we do, it is why work is such an important part of our identities, and it is an important form of expression even when it is restricted. We spend time and effort to make something useful out of nothing, to make meals out of food and food out of dirt. When our efforts are wasted, when the fruits of our labor are left out to rot, it devalues our work and devalues us as workers.

Prior to capitalism, many products were not commodities. They were produced and in many cases they were sold, but they were not commodities in the way modern objects are. This is because these products were not viewed as being synonymous and interchangeable with all other products. Instead they were viewed as individual pieces of work, and they were valued as

such. In contrast the modern commodity is a more abstract object, and it is valued not alone, but against all other commodities (Marx). The commodity hides the individual natures of products and views them as interchangeable, thus we can trade commodities on vast scales, as well as trade between very different types of objects. In doing so, commodification creates both an aesthetic quality that must be upheld by all products, as catering to a uniform image helps them to be traded amongst other commodities, but it also hides the individuality that a laborer puts into their craft. A worker living in a non commodified society like feudalism could take great pride in their work. A woodcarver's box was viewed with respect, and so was the woodcarver. Their products were viewed highly, for they had taken *visible individual* labor to produce, and as a result they were not wasted. The worker's work was not devalued by wasting what they poured themselves into. Today, that labor is hidden by the commodity, and that individual contribution has been hidden by the commodity, and workers have resultingly been seriously devalued by society, their fruits of labor are ground into the dust. This result is almost certainly why we see "crises of faith" amongst workers in high waste industries. We do not see low-waste workers like jewelers quiet-quitting, but we do see agricultural workers out on strike*. We must remember that commodification does not sever the worker from their work, it just hides the connection. Jewelry is a commodified industry like food work, but jewelry is already valued by society for various reasons outside of the labor put into it, so it is not a very wasteful industry. Agricultural work on the other hand is not valued by our society, and when the one thing we do value, labor, is hidden, agricultural products are resultingly treated with contempt. If someone were to destroy an artist's magnum opus, we would riot, but we let peaches rot and do not even think of the orchard workers. When someone's life's work is treated with such disrespect, it remains no

wonder that they take little pride in it. It is no wonder, when we treat people's contributions with the contempt that is waste, that they feel unvalued and unappreciated.

The teleological and artistic arguments that I have made above about the relationship between waste and work might fail to convince many of this issue. Why should I care about my "labor's purpose" when I have to eat? To address this criticism, we have to look at how waste literally devalues labor, in that it actually results in less money going into a worker's wallet. To understand how this happens, we have to first understand how commodities gain their value. Commodities are valued in two ways, they have a use value, and an exchange value. In capitalism, the exchange value dominates, and this value is derived roughly from labor time. The commodity ends up being valued by the average amount of time a laborer must spend working on it. Not the actual time, which would mean slow workers make more expensive goods, but the average time, because labor becomes abstract under capitalism, and thus the labor time used to determine exchange value reflects work in general for that commodity. It reflects not the work of an individual worker, but the work of all workers in an industry. Workers are in turn commodities, their labor power is a commodity itself, a commodity that has a use value, (producing commodities, and thus exchange values) and an exchange value, (wages). The worker's exchange value is related to their use value, it reflects mainly the value of their capacity to work, which is roughly the expected amount of commodities they can produce. Here lies the issue with waste. If a commodity is determined by the average labor time, that labor time does not include the time that is wasted. Average labor time has an important caveat. Both forms of value, use and exchange must be present if the object is to be valuable. "Nothing can have value without being an object of utility. If it is useless, the labor contained in it is useless, cannot be reckoned as labor, and cannot therefore create value." (Marx, 33). Wasted commodities have no

value, they have no use value, and they also can not function as commodities because they are not traded on the market. As a result, any labor that goes into producing waste is separate from labor producing useful commodities. If an agricultural worker works a 9 hour shift, they only produce 6 hours of real commodities, and the remaining 3 hours are spent making waste, and as a result agricultural work is unequal to other less wasteful industries. The farmer must take 9 hours to produce what the jeweler produces in 6, and the resulting commodities are *equally valued despite taking different amounts of work*. If we go back to examine how the exchange value of labor is determined, we find that it is roughly equal to the capacity for a worker to produce commodities. If this is the case, then workers in wasteful industries are valued less than workers in low-waste industries, because workers in wasteful industries must spend parts of their time producing nothing of value. They cannot produce as many commodities as any less wasteful industry, and as a result their wages are lower. We can see this conclusively by looking at the average wage of agricultural workers which is just a little bit over minimum wage, and the lowest paid industry in the US is of course fast food, a highly wasteful industry (Barclay) (Bureau of Labor Statistics). This observation even holds true if one takes a subjectivist approach to economics, as work spent producing no commodities and thus no tradable goods is always going to be valued less than work spent producing commodities.

The market system and its expansion of commodification, has created unprecedented levels of waste. This has been done through the aestheticization of products, which has resulted in waste in the marketplace, and it has been done through a devaluing of products themselves, by obscuring the individual contributions of workers. This waste has devalued work itself, by making a mockery of the labor taken to produce every product that is then made yesterday's garbage. The waste has even made an impact on the wages of workers, it has depressed the

monetary value of work. Today this waste has almost certainly contributed in a large way to the crises that plague the American workforce, with dissatisfaction with work at all time highs (Collins). If we are to solve this issue, if we are to give workers the dignity, respect, and value they have earned, we must end the market logic and commodification that has created this mess, and thereby end the rampant waste that has devalued and debased labor itself*.

The question that is always asked to anyone who aims to abolish the present state of things is; what state of things is to come? In this context, calling for the end of the commodity raises some very important questions about what that would look like for food. Will we be able to eat under communism? Barring some crazy technological advancement that results from the liberation of the means of production, eating food will still be a very important part of any non-commodified society. Many of the changes to how food will be valued and used are unable to be anticipated, just as medieval peasants were entirely unable to anticipate the invention of the corn maze. Some things do logically progress though, and these things we can imagine would likely take shape in our non-commodity society. The first thing that might result is the end of value for produce. Non-commodified produce will not have an exchange value, as it won't be exchanged. Instead it may only have a use-value, which would result in food only being valued for its unique ability to keep people living. In this case, browned cauliflower and bruised peaches would not have significantly less value than their pristine counterparts, as the use value differences are very limited, (I believe bruised peaches cannot be canned, which would be the only thing they are inferior to pristine peaches at). The aesthetic expectation for food would melt away entirely, as that is fundamentally a quality of exchange value, for it represents the labor that is put into the object in visual terms, a plentiful plum display represents a large amount of labor used to procure all those plums. Aesthetics have no use value when it comes to food, so they

would likely cease to exist. The big question remains; is this non-wasteful society worth living in, if it entails the destruction of the exchange value form, and where the only value is use-value? Are people fundamentally creatures of the market, baseball card traders and lemonade sellers, and as this decommodification would be the destruction of the greatest and most integrated market of all time, would we all be poorer on an emotional level even if we were richer and less wasteful on a material level? *Will we miss capitalism?*

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Comments:

- a. Responded to all your line edits, such as the double spaces, "it's" and lots of spots that were repetitive. These were mostly aesthetic changes, but they made the paper more professional and concise.
- b. Replaced 2nd person with 3rd person to add professionalism, separate the reader from the author, and to better reflect the societal realities of today. This improves the paper by making it more academic and professional.
- c. Clarified the position of jewelers because I figured it might be confusing why they were referenced at all, when I don't have anything against jewelers, I just chose them as a characteristic low-waste industry. Removes potential confusion, especially as I reference them a lot.
- d. Cleaned up this paragraph and removed some of the more egregiously idealistic prose. This makes the essay better because it focuses attention back on the actual claim, and not on the rather corny word usage and EXAGGERATED speech. It also removes some of the more idealistic conclusions that could have previously been drawn from this conclusion, and grounds it a little bit more in the real world.