

Agency Without Subjects

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I want to begin this response to Timothy Morton's essay by placing it, with deliberate perversity, into dialogue with the classical historical-materialist account of a "strange stranger": Marx's definition of the commodity form and commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Capital*.¹ This comparison reveals the promise of Morton's object-oriented ontology for ecological thinking—a thinking that necessarily reframes materialist predications of subjects, objects, and their relations—as well as its critical limitations. This pairing is perverse, of course, because Morton's ontology is premised on a categorical refusal of anthropocentric theories, whether Kantian or Marxist, in favor of "infinite coexistence" among "real entities," where entity refers to all lifeforms from "goldfish to intergalactic dust clouds."² Morton's realism is a project in radical horizontality, a de-prioritizing of the human subject and its privileged categories (world, history, the market) and a de-hierarchizing of lifeforms such that there is "no top object (such as God) and no bottom object (such as matter)."³ Such horizontalizing extends to include the temporal and spatial scales of planetary existence, stripping human history of any privileged claims to being and time. At the same time, it levels the "essence" of all entities to a single feature: what Morton calls their "withdrawn core."⁴

It is precisely in this defining feature of the "withdrawn core" where uncanny echoes of Marx's materialist theory of the commodity begin to emerge, against all odds. Indeed, if we momentarily set aside the obvious differences between these theories—that is, that Marx's theory of the commodity describes a historically particular manifestation of material objects in the sphere of production for exchange within capitalist societies, rather than Morton's deliberately universalized description of "all real entities"—we might observe striking similarities in their unsettling of the conceptual categories of subject and object. What animates both theories is a demystifying imperative—to expose the properly ironic divergence between the appearances of things and their actual reality—that works to intensify, rather than resolve, the resulting sense of thoroughgoing strangeness. These theorists exhort us to "wake up" to a reality of relational being that is, as both Marx and Morton say, profoundly "queer."⁵

Grounding both Marx's and Morton's accounts is a conception of material objects motivated by the work of the negative. The defining qualities of the objects under examination inhere not in what Marx calls their "coarsely sensuous objectivity" but rather in a recalcitrance that eludes empirical knowability.⁶ The first sentence of Marx's famous description of the commodity lays out a framework of empirical appearances and rational comprehension, the world of "at first sight"—a world that the second sentence will turn on its head by invoking a supersensible realm whose materialist reality consists precisely of its "meta-

physical" mysteries.⁷ Morton employs a similar inversion in his essay in his extended description-by-negation of the computer keys. "The way the dust falls on the keys is not the keys. The feeling my fingers register on the keys is not the keys. The plastic edges of the keys are not the keys. The ensemble of keys arranged QWERTY style is not the keys. This one /o/ key is not the keys," Morton declares.⁸ By insisting that any identifiable, sensuous dimension of an object such as these keys is not equivalent to its real nature, Morton argues that this nature is *defined* by hiddenness: all things "hide the rules of [their] game from all comers, including themselves."⁹ In an animating paradox, both theorists insist on the objective nature of this negative or "withdrawn" essence, rendering the realm of empirical appearances the site of mystification and the hidden, "metaphysical" realm the locus of the real. In turn, the fundamentally ironic nature of material objects means that they are constituted not only by relational but internal difference.¹⁰ This infinite regress of differentiation unsettles clear boundaries and relations—"a man knows not where to have it," in Marx's famous riff on Shakespeare's *Dame Quickly*—which in turn deprives the human subject of a removed posture of rational judgment and sovereignty.¹¹

What is thrown into doubt by these deconstructions of the once-familiar object is precisely the clear demarcation that would divide the subject world from the object world, humans from things. Emerging instead is a powerfully disorienting sense of being, as Morton puts it, "*in the story*."¹² What surrounds us is not exterior to us; at some fundamental level, we are immersed in the same categories of being as those things over which we assumed ownership. In Marx's account, the commodity eerily begins to resemble the human subject—the table "stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas"—even as the human is steadily depersonified, engrossed in social relations whose objective and determinative structure remain hidden from view.¹³ As Marx writes in a key footnote to *Capital*: "In a certain sense, a man is in the same situation as a commodity."¹⁴ Or, as Morton puts it in a different register, "*ontologically* there is very little difference between a person and a plastic key on a laptop."¹⁵ These revelations of a complex relationality that frames subjects and objects as "strange strangers" engaged in mysterious transactions amount, in both theories, to a thoroughgoing "humiliation of the human."¹⁶

And yet here the divergence of these approaches asserts itself with renewed vigor. The force of Marx's ironic inversion emerges in its revelation that we are socially and historically determined, and that this determination expresses itself in things and our relation to them. Marx's analysis uncovers the "withdrawn core" of the commodity as value, the expression of social relations as they are mediated by the market. Value illuminates the vast network of interconnection under capitalism—interconnection grounded in inequality and exploitation—that the "social hieroglyphic" of the commodity veils as a privatized relationship between person and thing. Thus the strangeness which Marx's critique lays bare is the reality of "definite relations, which are independent of [human] will"—the discovery, in other words, of causality, determination, and structural inequality at a profoundly abstract and collective scale.¹⁷ "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence," Marx

claims, “but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”¹⁸ This determinative “social existence,” whereby we are immersed, at every level of our daily lives, in unequal relations that remain independent of our will and obscured from view, is replaced in Morton’s theory with a very different vision: that of “infinite coexistence.” For Morton, the “withdrawn core” which characterizes material life is precisely the *withdrawal of determination itself*. All entities are suspended in mutual indetermination, coexisting in an uncanny strangeness that remains perpetually in process, perpetually evolving. This deep logic of the “strange stranger” means, then, that all interactions between material forms must also remain undetermined: “every object is engaged in uncompromising translations of other objects”; “we make contact with real entities”; “objects press[] upon us and each other.”¹⁹

What is the upshot of this critical difference? We might say, first, that Morton’s ontological perspective deliberately “withdraws” causality and hierarchy from its account of “infinite coexistence,” a withdrawal that evacuates the properly sociohistorical stakes central to Marx’s materialism. Morton’s opening “thought-experiment” claims that the computer keys bear a phenomenological complexity that recedes infinitely from apprehension; yet there is no corresponding attention to the social complexity built into the keys in their appearance as a commodity—a complexity that bespeaks a different “realism” entirely. (Are these keys, for example, made in Apple manufacturer Foxconn’s notorious factories in Shenzhen, China?) Thus, paradoxically, what Morton includes as “real” is at once expanded to include a vast range of material phenomena *beyond* the commodity and the historical logics of capitalist development and yet curiously elusive about this realm of social production in its real, material effects. Instead, Morton’s descriptions of interrelationality are framed in affective terms—eros, aggression, sincerity, and melancholy—that denotes a leveled, if uneasy, intimacy rather than the unceasing alienation-effects of commodity fetishism and the persistent social divisions it conceals. We “wake up,” in Morton’s theory, “inside” a present strangely devoid of the determinative force of global capitalism and its corresponding inequities—as if the beginning of ecology coincides with the “end of history” in Francis Fukuyama’s sense.²⁰

Of course, this is exactly the point of Morton’s ecological ontology: the question of ecology necessarily widens the vantage of what counts as *social* and what counts as *relations*, offering a realism at once more “viscous” and more “nonlocal” than materialist frameworks. This is most bracingly demonstrated in his concept of “hyperobjects”: phenomena such as global warming, oil spills, or radioactive plutonium which are “massively distributed in time and space such that any particular (local) manifestation never reveals the totality of the hyperobject.”²¹ In their revelation of material forms and time-scales heterogeneous to the particular economic determinations of the present, Morton’s hyperobjects provide a powerful counter-narrative to the materialist itinerary of the commodity. Moreover, they point to the limitations of the discourse of value for grasping ecological entities and relations that might well outlast the dynamics of capitalist development.

Yet these hyperobjects share a common, determinative characteristic, which Morton's ontological descriptions skirt: if the *effect* of the hyperobject is to produce radically horizontalized ecological relations among real entities, the cause of the hyperobject remains collective human action. "Hyperobjects" such as oil spills and climate change, in other words, illuminate the profound difference that humans, at the species level, represent to ecological coexistence in an age of environmental crisis. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, "because humans constitute a particular kind of species they can, in the process of dominating other species, acquire the status of a geologic force."²² The paradox of global warming, as Chakrabarty's essay suggests, is precisely that the shared ecological conditions it reveals necessitates a recognition of the singular "geological force" of human activity in producing these conditions. This collective human agency so "scaled-up" that it constitutes a "natural condition"—an agency arising in the complex conjuncture of the recent history of capitalist development and the deep history of planetary geology and species evolution—offers a view of social existence that diverges from Morton's leveled narrative of ecological coexistence in its reinscription, at a universalized level, of human determination.²³

This unlikely dialogue between Marx and Morton, materialist and ecological realist, has revealed the need for conceptualizing an abstract, species-wide agency that we should term *anthropogenic*: an agency in which all humans participate "independent of their will," whose effects are simultaneously shared and differentially distributed.²⁴ We might identify this anthropogenic agency as a manifestation of the objectively present but hidden essence—a force that renders us "strange strangers" to ourselves and other beings alike—with which both these theories have been concerned. This geological agency, in turn, demands more capacious and flexible historiographies of the Anthropocene Age that speak not only to its generalized ontologies, as Morton's work so brilliantly undertakes, or to its economic predications of value, as Marx's theory of the commodity demonstrates, but to its collective conditions and unequal circumscriptions. The effect of this ecologically minded historical materialism would be *not* to reinscribe the human in anthropocentric terms as the privileged subject of history or ecology, but instead to confront the distinctive kinds of responsibility, and corresponding "humiliations," we face as species-beings in a time of ecological crisis.

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¹ Timothy Morton, "Waking Up Inside an Object: The Subject of Ecology," *English Language Notes* 49, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 183–191.

² *Ibid.*, 189, 184.

³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵ Ibid., 185. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1981), 163.

⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 138.

⁷ “A commodity appears, at first sight, an extremely obvious, trivial thing. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx, *Capital*, 163).

⁸ Morton, “Waking Up,” 183.

⁹ Ibid., 184.

¹⁰ Marx claims that the interior non-identity of the commodity arises from its “twofold quality” as “both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value”—a dual nature that remains irreconcilable (*Capital*, 138). In Morton’s account, it is the mutual imbrication and plasticity of all matter that renders every being non-identical with itself: “lifeforms cannot by definition coincide with themselves in any sense. They are made of other lifeforms. And they derive from other lifeforms because of evolution. Yet they are different from other lifeforms” (*Capital*, 184–185).

¹¹ Ibid., 138.

¹² Morton, “Waking Up,” 188.

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, 163.

¹⁴ Ibid., 144n19.

¹⁵ Morton, “Waking Up,” 184.

¹⁶ Ibid., 185.

¹⁷ Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N.I. Stone (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1911), 11–12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Morton, “Waking Up,” 186, 189.

²⁰ Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History?” (originally published in *The National Interest* 16 [Summer 1989], <http://thenationalinterest.org>) argues that the end of the Cold War and the triumph of liberal democracy signals the endpoint of human’s ideological, governmental, and socioeconomic evolution. I invoke this now-anachronistic essay because its vision of a post-historical world, a world evacuated of contradiction itself, reverberates in an ecological register across Morton’s work.

²¹ Timothy Morton, “Hyperobjects are Nonlocal,” *Ecology Without Nature*, November 9, 2010, <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/11/hyperobjects-are-nonlocal.html>.

²² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009), 214.

²³ Ibid., 206.

²⁴ See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).