

RESPONSE TO ‘MĀORI INDIGENEITY AND COMMODITY
FETISHISM’ BY STEVEN WEBSTERFiona McCormack¹

I am appreciative of Steve Webster’s critical reading of my work and his considered attempt to extend my analysis. Webster suggests that an engagement with Marxist fetishism of commodities writings, particularly the relationship between use-value and exchange-value, will add nuance to my investigation of the convergences and contradictions between indigeneity, Māori treaty settlements, neoliberalisation and the marketisation of the environment (as exemplified by the Individual Transferable Quota [ITQ] mode of governance in New Zealand’s fisheries). I see much worth in this encouragement, though I would like to temper his enthusiasm with some preliminary thoughts; and rather than traverse the same ethnographic material raised by Webster, my argument here can be best illustrated through a consideration of the commensurability of Māori and Hawaiian fisheries.

The distinction between use-value and exchange-value is a persuasive means through which to amplify the differences between fisheries regimes where rights are privatised and those governed by alternate property constructs; an insight of importance given the powerful global move towards marketising nature of which ITQ enclosures are perceived to be an early, and successful, prototype. In a comparison of Hawaii’s limited entry permit programme (restricted to the longline pelagic fishery) and New Zealand’s comprehensive individualised quota system, the story could unfold as follows:

An ITQ grants to a holder an asset of value: a perpetual and tradable property right in a fish stock. The emphasis is on an economic relationship whereby the objective of the owner is to maximise returns on the asset – the catch right to the quota species. Limited entry permits are perceived as suboptimal, an evolutionary antecedent to ITQs. Although professing similarities to ITQ technologies in that they grant a pseudo property right to a specified number of individuals, and can be transferred to others for a cost, divergences are more pronounced than analogies.

The way that limited entry permits are constructed and perceived and the relationships they engender, deviates from private property. Young (1983) considers them a restricted common property, not an exclusive property right. Emphasis is placed on a community of fishers engaging in a common seascape, subject to structured rules governing their use of the resource. Permits are designed as privileges not perpetual rights; a tenuous and revocable entitlement subject to broader shifts in human-environment economic relations. They are, also, decidedly concrete. They refer to a right to hunt fish, not a perpetual claim to a quantity of fish stock, including the as yet unborn. Fishers operate under a total quota that when reached triggers a fishery closure, whereas, ITQ fisheries slice up the quota, individualising rights to the resource. Importantly, the limited entry system in Hawaii has not resulted in major consolidations, a remarkable difference from the consolidation in New Zealand fisheries.

The longline permits were freely allocated in Hawaii, however new entrants now 'transfer' them from a previous holder. An informal market has emerged and the price of transactions has risen over time. While there is no official data on the current price of permit transfers anecdotal evidence suggests they are worth from US\$60,000 to US\$100,000, with the value fluctuating downwards when closures occur. Longline permits are thus considered to have an economic value, and may even be commodity-like. The value, however, arises out of production, and can be conceptualised as a Marxian use-value. Webster explains: For Marx a 'use-value' is a quality arising from the intrinsic usefulness of a commodity in a social and historical context from which this value is inseparable. (That limited entry permits are typologically a use-value is evidenced by the value of the permit decreasing when the fishery is closed). It is the individual labour in a social context (harvesting fish from nature) that produces the use-value of a commodity. 'Exchange-value', conversely, is a quantity abstracted from the specifics of use-value and is based on exchange of a quantity of one commodity for a quantity of another. It signifies an entirely quantitative relationship that varies independently of the use-value. It is the abstracted labour-power in the general context of market exchange that produces the exchange-value of a commodity (Webster). ITQs represent an exchange-value, a shift from positioning value in production to value in the marketplace and an intense focus on the future arises simultaneously with a rejection of historical context and awareness. Further, in comparison to ITQs, fishing permits cannot readily be used as collateral in banks. They cannot be 'perfected'. Hawaiian permits can at any stage be revoked by the Federal government. They are much less financially pliable than individualised quota and are unlikely to be morphed into financial derivatives.

Webster argues that Marx's distinction between use-value and exchange-value is academic; although Marx represented an historic displacement of use-value by exchange-value in line with increasing commoditisation, he nevertheless recognised that use-value subsists in the commodity even in highly capitalistic societies. Webster uses this persistence to discuss the incompleteness of neoliberalisation, the oft-surprising way that indigeneity co-opts and opposes commoditisation. Through imagined ethnographic encounters (amplified from my own observations) Webster highlights the ambiguous coupling of use and exchange-value to emphasise the resistant nature of Māori social relations and economic practices; though acknowledges that these are necessarily altered as they hit against neoliberal practices. While agreeing with the major tenets of this argument, I find the anthropological tradition of dichotomising gifts and commodities a powerful means through which to draw attention to the existence of distinctive cultural logics.

The theory of the gift allows for a supple language that mediates between abstract conceptualisation and empirical analysis; and it does so in ways that highlight the quotidian, the daily work of navigating social relations, of maintaining a sense of collective identity, and the emergence of often small and unremarkable forms of resistance that, writ large, become powerful obstructions to neoliberalisation. Alternatively, while commoditisation, the subjection of goods to market exchange, appears antithetical to gifting, threaded throughout my analysis is that products of social labour, such as fish, can be contemporarily both commodity and gift. This possibility is embedded in local economies and property regimes and does not signify a schism in either social or economic spheres. For instance, in Hawaii there is an institutional fluidity between commercial and non-commercial fishing practices and fishermen both extensively gift and sell their catch. This transactional permeability is key to understanding how Pacific peoples balance an engagement with capitalism with the richness associated with their traditional way of life. Calling fishing in Hawaii gift exchange makes the point that it is not wholly subsumed to capitalist discipline; non-capitalist social relations enlivened by tradition, may in fact trump the systematic thrust towards alienation, accumulation and an ever-expanding search for new commodities.

The theory of the gift can be extended to human-environment relations. While the pelagic longline fishery in Hawaii is the most explicitly commercial, a tacit gift economy is manifest and a gift based sociality is apparent among human participants and between humans and the non-human environment. Importantly, fishing rights are not privatised and the fish produced cannot be considered true commodities. Longline fishers retain an important element of coastal

custodianship, they are mere visitors in the ocean commons. The fish remain hidden until caught, their opaque home defying the machinery of accountancy necessitated in ITQs. Tuna and swordfish are the fishermen's primary targets yet given the difficulty in controlling the ocean's products as private property, other species are attracted to the fishermen's hooks. Opah, mahi mahi, marlin and monchong, the longliners 'by-catch', feature at the Honolulu fish auction, capturing good prices for their ocean hunters. For captains and their contracted crew there is a considerable gift-like quality to their commodity provision – involving the extension of the person and social relations into the product. Fish are a crucial offering at the crew's social gatherings at port, and the commercial success of each operation is directly measured by the properties of the docked fish. At the auction fish are labelled with a colour-coded tag specific to their captors' vessel and boats get paid daily according to the attributes of their catch. It is the process of valuing at auction that transforms the gift-like quality of the fish into a commodity, a sensory performance based on sorting fat, temperature, colour and texture. Like Tsing's (2013) mushrooms at the point of sorting, the fish now become commodities of a particular size and grade, ready for use and exchange.

ITQ fisheries engender very different social relations. Quota holders and fishermen are constructed as resource owners or lessees, motivated to protect their private gains, or ensnared to enhance those of the proprietors. This has implications for ecosystem governance as associated or dependent species are removed from the equation of maximizing individual wealth through the value of the commodity, that is, the fishing right to a particular stock. The relationship between humans and the environment is transformed: fish species for which the extractor has not acquired rights are invisibilised: dumped and discarded, their non-target flesh adding no value to the asset. Gift-like qualities are removed from the commodity.

The substitution of a market based relationship for that of the gift and the attachment of value to the catch right rather than the fish product enables the emergence of novel types of agency. Quota holders are empowered as actors in a quota market where transferability is key and the consolidation of fishing rights a sequential occurrence. Although an informal market may have arisen in the Hawaii pelagic fishery whereby permit transfers occur under the radar of management's accountancy, the fishery retains its 'Mom-and-Pop' characteristic – while one company owns seven permits, the vast majority of the 144 permit holders own one boat. Significantly what is transferred in the permit transaction, the right to hunt fish, has an important element of the commons.

Neoliberalisation, as signalled by the rolling out of ITQ regimes, works to rigidify the distinction between gifts and commodities, transforming both phenomena into extreme and alienated versions of their original selves. That is, the increased pressure in neoliberal governance to remove the gift from the commodity is also experienced in the reverse; the commodity is removed from the gift. In New Zealand, commercial and non-commercial fishing categories are rigidly defended. Consequentially, for Māori, fishing is either commercial, captured by the machinery of the quota market wherein trading 'virtual fish' generates more wealth than catching fish of flesh, or, an aestheticised ceremonial gifting event (for hui and tangi under Customary Regulations) where reciprocation is a criminal offense; koha is defined as not for pecuniary gain, a designation which extends to the reciprocation of fish for oranges (McCormack 2008). Yet this dichotomisation is never stable, as Tsing suggests: 'Despite all the apparatus of private property, markets, commodity fetishism and more, taking the gift out of the commodity is never easy. It is work that has to be repeated over and over' (2013, 21). As does the work of removing the commodity from the gift; anecdotal evidence, for instance, suggests an efflorescence of hui and tangi in Māori coastal communities.

My point in all of this is not in the least radical. As Webster notes, while there are discernible consistencies to my analysis, I have not strongly embraced an allegiance to a core paradigm. There are of course rigorous academic objections to this bricolage approach that may be seen to challenge a vision of anthropology as an accumulation of knowledge over time. My own contribution is much more mundane: as anthropologists our ethnographic material is differently enlivened by the theoretical paradigms we employ, whether gift and commodity, or use value and exchange value or something else borrowed, gift-like, from our conceptual toolkit. Knauff (2006) is informative in this regard.

Finally, my argument concerning marae in my forthcoming essay is much more quotidian than Webster presents. I neither reinforce Sissons' (2010) suggestion regarding the organisation of marae as 'houses', nor Webster's argument regarding the pre-eminence of hapū. To quote:

The suggestion that *marae* and cultural identity are co-constituted and the tendency, within the context of a multicultural modern New Zealand, to represent *marae* as a bastion of Māoriness, a singularly Māori space, requires rethinking [...] *marae* are necessarily embedded in the neoliberal opportunities, constraints, and practices that are constitutive of the wider society, and, their autonomy is far from absolute.

Webster underlines my emphasis on the unpredictability of indigenous articulations with neoliberal-capitalism, such that we are just as likely to see incidences of retribalisation as Rata's neotribalisation. Yet, as the comparison between Hawaii and New Zealand shows, at least in the case of fisheries, the constraints under which Māori operate are powerful. ITQs are 'sticky'; it is very difficult to reverse privatisations, and the system has a propensity to generate institutional lock-in effects, particularly when ITQs have been turned into financial instruments, divorced from productive connections.

NOTES

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