

# Economic Aspects of Omnipotence\*

**Francisco Carlos Ribeiro**

Faculdade de Tecnologia de Sorocaba José Crespo Gonzales, Sorocaba, Brazil  
Email: [francisco.ribeiro@fatec.sp.gov.br](mailto:francisco.ribeiro@fatec.sp.gov.br)

Received 5 February 2014; revised 5 March 2014; accepted 12 March 2014

Copyright © 2014 by author and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.  
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

**This article purposes that omnipotence feelings are the best issue to explain the relationship between ostentation and socio-economic behavior. According to my propositions, we would better comprehend the mechanisms of ostentation in our society, and its consequences not only to the economy, but also to income redistribution initiatives, if we understand the interaction among omnipotence, commodity fetishism concepts and cultural values. The article also purposes in this direction, to measure the commodity fetishism degree as valuable tool for economics.**

## Keywords

**Omnipotence, Ostentation, Commodity Fetishism, Historical Materialism, Culture, Conspicuous Consumption**

---

## 1. Introduction

This article is based on some ideas discussed in my doctoral dissertation presented at ESEADE—Argentina, and published in my book “Aspectos Economicos da Onipotência”, Annablume Publisher, in 2011 and it explores the interaction between omnipotence and ostentation, discussing the economic aspects which derive from this process. It aims to explain how human relations can be mediated by ostentation and analyze its economic implications. With a speculative approach to these concepts, it proposes the elaboration of a commodity fetishism index number.

It emphasizes that the ostentation mechanism is directly related to the dynamics of infantile omnipotence, while the relationship between primitivism and the dependency of a single-object pointed out by Balint would explain the greater or lesser intensity in the dispute for certain instruments of fetishism, whose importance will be related to each cultural environment. This study will also discuss the relationship between Historical Materialism and cultural values attempting to explain how the various instruments of fetishism are chosen. It also reassesses the concepts related to Veblen’s conspicuous consumption and the commodity fetishism principles introduced by Marx considering the interaction with omnipotence concepts and cultural values, and discussing

the relationship among omnipotence, ostentation and justice in egalitarian societies. The objective is to propose the elaboration of a commodity fetishism index number, speculating about its format and pointing out not only the conceptual, but also the statistical limitations faced during its elaboration.

The topics mentioned above will be very concisely discussed due to being just an article.

## 2. The Omnipotence Principles Discussed in the Works of Margareth Mahler, Melanie Klein and Other Authors

When I first read Malinowsky's book *Argonautas do Pacífico Ocidental* (*Argonauts of Western Pacific*), two aspects drew my attention: the first one was a ritual termed as *Kula*, a kind of ceremonial gift exchange system in which the status of an individual is not measured by what he possesses, but rather by what he is able to give to others. The other one was the yam storage houses of the analyzed tribes. Malinowski noticed that the natives built silos intentionally leaving spaces between the wooden boards in order to display and ostentate how much food each family had been able to produce: the bigger the amount, the higher their prestige in the tribe would be [1].

So I started wondering about what really induces people's ostentatious behavior, given that the society described by Malinowski could not be considered "capitalist", and therefore the ostentation of material assets was not related to the existence of private properties or use of the workforce. According to Malinowski, the dynamics of the ostentation happened there in a different manner, since it was not a consequence of the accumulation of capital, but rather of the grandiosity of the gift. It was related to the generosity involved in this process and the ability to give considerable gifts.

There must be something that happens among human beings previously to the accumulation process, and which originates their ostentatious behavior. If I manage to understand this process, I will comprehend better the difficulties involved in the income redistribution initiatives. For this reason, I have been reading works from psychoanalysts and other thinkers in order to understand the psychological process related to fetishism<sup>1</sup>, and the most reasonable explanation I have found is related to the concept of infantile omnipotence.

In the works of Margaret Mahler [2], the concept of omnipotence is associated to the infantile separation anxiety and the development of the narcissistic personality. The works of Melanie Klein [3], which do not point out so explicitly the concept of subphases mentioned by Mahler, also mention the omnipotence feelings which make the child believe that she could eliminate or be eliminated by her parents through her thoughts.

The concept of the omnipotence feeling is discussed by several other authors. Freud pointed out in his book "Mal-estar na Civilização" [4] ("Civilization and its Discontents") that this characteristic should not be neglected, since the satisfaction of this instinct leads to an extremely intense narcissistic feeling because the ego interprets it as the fulfillment of an old omnipotence desire. Even the interpersonal psychoanalysts affirm that we are all narcissistic to a degree, and the omnipotence feelings are essential for the development of the self-esteem and narcissism itself<sup>2</sup>.

## 3. Omnipotence, the Reality Principle and Fetishism Instruments

The omnipotence feeling experienced in early childhood, and which is associated with narcissism, is subdued by the Freudian reality principle, including the narcissistic inflation, and it will lead individuals to avoid pain and seek pleasure. However, the individual will always try to express this omnipotence feeling in a culturally accepted manner, since it was restrained by the reality principle.

This process will be related to the cultural value attributed to instruments of fetishism<sup>3</sup>, and also to their diversity. Such instruments could be fame, power, culture, wisdom, wealth or something else that could originate the dominance of one individual over another and bring back the omnipotence feeling to that person. This individual would consider being in a higher position since he would possess something appreciated by others: this is

<sup>1</sup>I will consider the frontiers of knowledge related to this concept, given that I am just an economist.

<sup>2</sup>These concepts are discussed in the book *Narcissism and the interpersonal self*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, by FISCALINI, John; GREY, Alan L., and also in a few others [5].

<sup>3</sup>The terminology "instruments of fetishism" is used here to describe the attributes that make individuals consider themselves to be in a higher position compared to others. As pointed out by Morin [6], the affirmation of individuality can be interpreted as the intention to eliminate another person [p. 68]. It can be said that omnipotence feelings resurge when a person symbolically eliminates another individual, reaffirming her own omnipotence over the others; otherwise, we would have a Hobbesian state of nature.

the dawn of ostentation. Analyzing the social aspect of this process, we can make an analogy with the concepts pointed out by Balint.

#### 4. The Relationship between Primitivism and the Dependency on a Particular Object Pointed out by Balint

Michel Balint, points out that “[...] on the whole it can be said that the more primitive a man is, the more dependent he will be on the particular object [...]” [7]. The more dependent on a particular object is a society in order to express omnipotence, the greater will be the difficulties faced to implement changes, especially if this object is a matter of competition. If we correlate this concept with Erich Fromm’s principles which affirm that a man who represents himself through his possessions can accept to have his own dignity threatened, but not his assets, given that it is interpreted as a threat to his own life [8], we can reach two different conclusions based on Balintian and Frommian principles.

According to Balint’s perspective, the more primitive an individual is, the more dependent he will be on a particular object, so the more primitive a society is, the more dependent it will be on a particular object in the ostentation process. We can also affirm that the lesser fetishism instruments available to demonstrate omnipotence, the greater will be the dispute for a single or few instruments, and any initiative to redistribute those instruments will not be easily accepted, originating a rancorous and primitive reaction.

On the other hand, the greater the importance of material possessions as the main attribute of differentiation, the lesser people will be willing to redistribute those possessions, and this predominance culturally happens in a greater or lesser degree<sup>4</sup>.

#### 5. Culture and Historical Materialism.

The researches of scholars such as Malinowski [9], Laraia [10] and a few others accept that the culture is developed by all the structures related to knowledge, beliefs, arts, moral principles, laws, personal behaviors, and everything else which represents the abilities acquired by an individual who is part of a society.

So we can conclude that the demands and material assets required to fulfill human needs are important elements in the cultural development. However, the culture will determine the most suitable social behavior to obtain those assets, defining beliefs and other social aspects in order to fulfill the material needs of the individual.

Those material needs must be fulfilled, but the social approach to the satisfaction process will depend on the behavior, historical experience, taboos and other traditions of each society.

Considering that material conditions are essential to the other aspects of human existence, we conclude that culture deeply influences our approach to those material impositions.

When we analyze the original letters sent by Marx and Engels [11], we notice that both of them knew about not only the importance of the culture over the material conditions, but also of the material conditions over the culture. However, their slightly different explanations about this subject originated two different currents of Historical Materialists, termed here as Orthodox Historical Materialists and Cultural Historical Materialists<sup>5</sup>.

In my doctoral dissertation completed at ESEADE, in Argentina [12], and in my book [13], I have analyzed the main currents of thought regarding Historical Materialism, but my comments on it will have to be summarized here.

I will begin with Isaiah Berlin’s perception on the Marxian concept of Historical Materialism which is related to the Orthodox current. In the chapter related to Historical Materialism of his book “Karl Marx”, Berlin [14] explains that every superstructure will be eventually modified by the changes in the economic principles, but he also affirms that the relationship between material conditions and social changes is not clear enough since there are quite a few contradictions between those two variables.

On one hand, we know that material ambitions can change, whereas cultural and social behavior will be mod-

<sup>4</sup>Due to the limitation of space for this article, this concept is more adequately discussed in my doctoral dissertation.

<sup>5</sup>In a letter to Annenkov, dated 28th December, 1846, Marx states that “the material relationships originate all other relationships”. In my opinion, this concept generates the Orthodox Historical Materialism current. On the other hand, in his letter to Starkenburg, dated January, 1894, Engels affirms that it is necessary to combine the predominance of the material conditions, cultural influences and social behavior in order to change social reality, considering those factors as influent as the historical context and the predominance of the individual desire over the collective interest. Engels will gradually explain this relativization process, beginning with the letters to Starkenburg, C. Schmidt (this one dated August, 1890), and reaching its maturity in his letter to J. Bloch, dated September 1890. I believe the extremely influential arguments found in his letter to Bloch are the cornerstones which originate the cultural current of Historical Materialism.

ified only when people agree to implement new social conditions. On the other hand, when we analyze the book “A concepção materialista da História (‘The materialist conception of History’)”, there is no doubt regarding Plekhanov’s point of view, which is reaffirmed by the following observation: the state of the productive forces determines the most important factors involved in social relations [15]. In other words, we have here a predominantly classic Materialist viewpoint which affirms that all other relations are determined by material relations.

But Politzer [16] has a quite curious standpoint on it. He considers the predominance of material conditions over the other ones, but at the same time he does not disregard the wide influence of cultural and ideological aspects over material conditions, and which is also affirmed by Engels. Politzer has a very interesting point of view on this topic, and in my dissertation it is named “Politzer’s solution”. He asserts that the material aspect of ideas is the reason behind their power, pointing out that the power of the ideas is directly related to their material roots. He emphasizes the prevalence of material conditions over all others, since the power of the ideas which influenced material relations originates itself from a material source.

In addition to it, other historical materialists point out that analyzing the existence of social relations only observing the predominance of material conditions and not considering the cultural influences is not reasonable. The influences between material and cultural influences are reciprocal, and Habermas [17] affirms that, only under exceptional conditions, culture, political configuration and legal structure are a consequence of material conditions.

Croce [18], Gramsci [19], Ellen Wood [20], Marta Harnecker [21] and Habermas point out that the culture is important to material conditions and, in the same way, material conditions are essential to the culture. Considering that principle, we conclude that material relations, and consequently the commodity fetishism analyzed by Marx would be different according to each cultural environment, given that the importance of material relations in each society is related to their culture.

## 6. The Correlation between Marxian Commodity Fetishism and Veblenian Conspicuous Consumption Concepts

In his famous book *O Capital. Crítica da economia política* [22] (“The Capital: A Critique of Political Economy - v. 1”), Marx explains that the equality of labor in our society is disguised by an apparent equality of value which is determined by the social time required to produce commodities. Knowing that the social time required is measured by values, the capitalist system modifies labor characteristics from several activities to a standard measurement which is, in a wider analysis, nothing else than a mere abstraction, since the labor required to produce similar commodities, even with the same technique, will never be the same. This abstraction is well explained by the labor theory of value, even considering the theoretical problems involved in the conversion from values into prices.

But we have to bear in mind that human beings mediate their relations through commodities, and according to Marx, a series of activities is transformed into a labor-time measure, and the relations among commodities are established by this unit of value. As a consequence of it, the relations among producers would be intermediated by the commodities produced, and the relations between producers and workers would be measured by the output of labor.

Consequently, relations among people are also intermediated by the output of labor and the production of commodities. Notwithstanding, we can easily notice that in order to produce commodities, people had to sell their workforce, so we have, side by side, manufacturers and expropriated people, who are forced to sell their own workforce.

Therefore, we can affirm that commodities conceal relations of exploitation among people and social classes. We also conclude that interpersonal relations are mediated by commodities which conceal social relations in themselves. This is essence of the commodity fetishism concept introduced by Marx in his book “Capital”.

We also have to consider that the number of instruments of fetishism, as well as the importance attributed to each one of them, will change from culture to culture. According to Balint, such importance could be ascribed to a single instrument, depending on the stage of primitivism of a given social group, and this concept can also be applied to our society without significant distortions. So considering the commodity fetishism dynamics as an integral part of our reality, the level of fetishism will change according to each culture. When material relations assume a greater importance or omnipotence relations and other instruments of fetishism are reduced by any process, the greater will be the commodity fetishism level. This is the first argumentative basis for the elaboration

tion of a commodity fetishism index number.

I would also like to make some observations on the concept of conspicuous consumption pointed out by Veblen [23].

According to Veblen, manual labor is undervalued by society, and a labor which requires a higher intellectual performance is considered noble. In this same manner, the consumption of goods and services which are strictly related to our basic needs is considered unworthy because everyone would be able to afford it. However, conspicuous consumption is extremely valued because those who are able to afford it are considered “wealthy” and being in a prominent position compared to others.

Nonetheless, if we consider a miser who cannot be linked to any kind of unproductive consumption and who is often seen bargaining for groceries, but is known by his fortune, and another individual who buys a yacht, we notice that both of them have considerable social prestige. The crucial difference between them is that people need to know that the miser owns a fortune, and in the case of the yacht owner it is demonstrated by the consumption of positional goods.

In this manner, if that same miser was frequently photographed and mentioned by Forbes magazine, he would enjoy as much social prestige as the yacht owners, or even more.

Therefore, we conclude that the concept of conspicuous consumption pointed out by Veblen is a demonstration of omnipotence from those involved in that process, but a well-known fortune of a miser who rarely spends his money also gives him the same level of prestige. Thus, we can affirm that the kind of consumption is not the only factor related to a higher status, but also the omnipotence feeling represented by it. The same omnipotence dynamics are also represented by the miser’s fortune.

## 7. Elaborating a Commodity Fetishism Index Number

There are conceptual and statistical difficulties involved in the elaboration of a commodity fetishism index number. Some conceptual problems arise when selecting the luxury goods to be considered in this analysis. We also have to consider the principles related to the income elasticity of demand, since which is a superior good for a given social class could be an inferior good for another one. Another important process happens when a product which is considered “exclusive” begins to be purchased by a great part of society, and consequently it would not be regarded as a positional good anymore.

However, jewelry and cosmetic products were always considered to be luxury goods, and people from deprived social classes have always tried to purchase at least a more affordable version of them, which clearly represents an imitation process<sup>6</sup>. Another product which has always been regarded as a luxury good is the automobile, and all the symbolism related to it.

From the statistical point of view, we faced some difficulties because a commodity fetishism index number has never been measured, so standardized statistics on this subject do not exist, and a statistical rearrangement was necessary in order to unify the available data. In this manner, we propose the elaboration of the following index number:

$$FI = \frac{\mu\%CL(GDP)}{\mu Gini} \times \frac{1 + ICS \text{ Factor}}{1 + (PG/100)} \times 100$$

FI = commodity fetishism index number.

$\mu\%CL(GDP)$  = percentage of consumption of luxury goods (jewelry and cosmetic products) compared to GDP.

ICS Factor = average increase in the car fleet.

$\mu Gini$  = Gini index number’s average (in order to purge the income concentration process).

PG = population growth (in order to purge the increase in the car fleet due to population growth).

Using this index number with a group of 13 countries, we have obtained the following ranking<sup>7</sup>: **Table 1**

<sup>6</sup>The “imitation process” mentioned here can be described as the consumption of a more affordable version of a given product, while still enabling the individual to differentiate himself from others.

<sup>7</sup>Due to the limitation of space for this article, it was not possible to include the calculations related to it. All the information regarding the procedures adopted in its elaboration, as well as the calculations and data sources, are described in my doctoral dissertation. Data used for this index were at least two periods. Because the index is purposed, it does not have an historical series synchronic, thus it was used at least two years or more according to available data. The calculus files are published in appendices of my book “Aspectos Econômicos da Onipotência” Annablume, 2011 and in my doctoral dissertation (ESEADE-Argentina-2009).

**Table 1.** The commodity fetishism index.

Country	Commodity fetishism index number
United States of America	3.910892
France	3.514093
Netherlands	3.466884
Ireland	2.591058
Sweden	2.453544
Japan	1.232901
Norway	1.199557
Mauritius Islands	1.062369
Brazil	0.870378
Colombia	0.686441
China	0.666317
England	0.271926
Armenia	0.265109

Source: Ribeiro (2011) “Aspectos Econômicos da Onipotência p. 158.

## 8. Final Considerations

Considering that commodity fetishism dynamics can be modified by the number of instruments of fetishism available to a given society, and also that the hierarchical position of the goods involved in the ostentation process can vary, we have to emphasize that the elaboration of a commodity fetishism index number would offer new possibilities for research and socio-economic analyses.

The proposed index number would also enable us to develop economic measurements which could lead to several new kinds of research, such as all the different analyses of the relationship between consumption and commodity fetishism, and also possible answers to questions such as “Why does a given country have a higher commodity fetishism index number? Which historical and socio-cultural factors contributed to a specific level of commodity fetishism in a given society?”.

We believe that the theory underlying this process is related to the infantile omnipotence dynamics pointed out by psychoanalysts, and it establishes the relations briefly exposed in this article.

## Acknowledgements

Paper presented at SABE—Society for Advancement of Behavioral Economics at Granada, July, 2012. I gratefully acknowledge the support of my advisor Martin Krause, Ph.D., for guiding me in the research for my doctoral dissertation which originated this article and for his presentation written in about my ideas in it. I would also like to thank Rodrigo Ribeiro and Gilvan José da Silva, Eliana Moreno for the translation of this article, and Ademir Barros dos Santos for revising it.

## References

- [1] Malinowski, B. (1976) *Argonautas do Pacífico Ocidental. Um relato do empreendimento e da aventura dos nativos nos arquipélagos da Nova Guiné Melanésia.* [Translation: Anton P. Carr (Chapters I-XV) and Lígia Aparecida Cardieri Mendonça (Chapters XVI-XXII), São Paulo: Abril Cultural, (Os Pensadores) 136-137, 83].
- [2] Mahler, M. (1982) *O processo de separação-individação.* Translation: Helena Mascarenhas de Souza. Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas.
- [3] Klein, M. (1954) *The Psycho-Analysis of Children.* The Hogarth Press, London.
- [4] Freud, S. (1997) *Mal-estar na Civilização.* Translation José Octavio de Aguiar Abreu. Imago, Rio de Janeiro, 80.

- [5] Fiscalini, J. (1993) Interpersonal Relations and the Problem of Narcissism. In: Fiscalini, J. and Grey, A.L., Eds., *Narcissism and the Interpersonal Self*, Columbia University Press, New York, 53-87.
- [6] Morin, E. (1997) O Homem e a morte. Translation: Cleone Augusto Rodrigues. Imago, Rio de Janeiro.
- [7] Balint, M. (1973) Problems of Human Pleasure and Behavior. Classic Essays in Humanistic Psychiatry. Liveright, New York, 23.
- [8] Fromm, E. (1970) O coração do homem. Seu gênio para o bem e para o mal. 3rd Edition. Trans. Octavio Alves Velho. Zahar Editores, Rio de Janeiro, 78.
- [9] Malinowski, B. (1975) Uma teoria científica da cultura. 3rd Edition. Translation: José Auto. Zahar Editores, Rio de Janeiro.
- [10] Laraia, Roque de Barros (2003) Cultura. Um conceito antropológico. 16th Edition. Jorge Zahar Editor, Rio de Janeiro, 25.
- [11] Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1965) Selected Correspondence. 2nd Edition. Translated by I. Lasker. Edited by Ryazanskaya. Progress Publishers, Moscow.
- [12] Ribeiro, F.C (2009) Aspectos Econômicos da Onipotência. 2009 199p. (Doutorado em Economia) ESEADE, Buenos Aires.
- [13] (2011) Aspectos Econômicos da Onipotência. Annablume, São Paulo.
- [14] Berlin, I. (1991) Karl Marx. Sua vida, seu meio e sua obra. Translation: Hélio Pólvora. Siciliano, São Paulo, 128.
- [15] Plekhanov, G. (1963) A concepção materialista da história. Da filosofia da história. Da concepção materialista da história. O papel do indivíduo na história. 3rd Edition. Escriba, São Paulo, 99.
- [16] Politzer, G. (1977) O que é o materialismo filosófico marxista. Publicações “O Proletário Vermelho”, Lisboa, 76.
- [17] Habermas, J. (1983) Para a reconstrução do materialismo histórico. Translation: Carlos Nelson Coutinho. Brasiliense. São Paulo, 124.
- [18] Croce, B. (1948) Materialismo histórico e economia marxista. Translation: Luis Washington. Instituto Progresso Editorial, São Paulo.
- [19] Gramsci, A. (1978) Concepção dialética da história. 2nd Edition. Civilização Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro.
- [20] Wood, E.M. (2003) Democracia contra Capitalismo. 1st Edition. Translated by Paulo Cesar Castanheira.
- [21] Harnecker, M. (1983) Os conceitos elementares do materialismo histórico. 2nd Edition. Global, São Paulo.
- [22] Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1980) O Capital. Crítica da economia política. 6th Edition. Processo de Produção do Capital, Livro Primeiro. Translation: Reginaldo Sant’anna. Civilização Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, 1, 79-82.
- [23] Veblen, T. (1983) A teoria da classe ociosa. Um estudo econômico das instituições. Introduction by Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida. Trans: Olívia Krähenbül. Abril Cultural, São Paulo.