



The Transformation of Human Essence in the Commodity Economy

Huynh Van Giau

Van Hien University Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0376-5092>

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the transformation of human essence in the commodity economy through the relationships among money, commodities, market competition, technology, and labor pressure. Rather than treating money, commodities, or technology as forces external to human beings, the article emphasizes that they are products created by humans; however, in the course of development, they can turn back to orient human behavior, restructure value systems, and distort social relations. By synthesizing academic studies on materialism, the psychological consequences of money, moral alienation in organizations, labor automation, and occupational stress, the article shows that the decline of humanistic values originates not only from individual greed but also from market mechanisms that make efficiency, profit, and competitiveness the central standards of evaluation. The findings affirm the need to reposition human beings as the ultimate goal of economic development, rather than allowing them to become instruments serving the logic of commodities and profit.

KEYWORDS: human essence, commodity economy, money, moral alienation, technology, occupational stress.

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**Corresponding Author:* Huynh Van Giau

1. INTRODUCTION

In the commodity economy, human beings not only produce material wealth but also produce the very social conditions that reshape them. Commodities, money, markets, and technology all begin as means of satisfying human needs; yet once they acquire universal significance, they may become mechanisms that regulate behavior. The central issue, therefore, is not merely how many products the economy creates, but what type of human being this process forms: a creative, responsible human being oriented toward social benefit, or a human being absorbed into exchange value, self-interested gain, and the legitimization of unethical conduct.

Studies on materialism show that placing property, ownership, and financial success at the center of life can transform the way individuals evaluate themselves and their social relations. Belk (1985) conceptualizes materialism as a tendency in which material possessions occupy an important position in personal life, while Richins and Dawson (1992) argue that materialism can be understood as a consumer value associated with possession centrality, happiness, and standards of success. From a social-psychological perspective, Kasser and Ryan (1993) show that when financial success becomes a central aspiration, it may be associated with lower levels of adjustment and well-being; Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006) further demonstrate that reminders of money can promote a self-sufficient orientation while reducing the tendency to seek and provide help. These findings make it possible to understand money not merely as a medium of exchange, but also as a symbolic agent capable of restructuring social behavior.

On this basis, the article approaches the transformation of human essence in the commodity economy through a method that moves from cause to effect and from phenomenon to essence. If commodities are observable phenomena, then the practices of production, exchange, and consumption provide a pathway for tracing the value system of the subject. If technology is the result of creative capacity, then the fact that technology can turn back and compete with human labor reveals the dialectical character of social products. If occupational stress appears as an individual condition, behind it lies the structure of competition and labor organization. In short, the article does not separate human beings from the economy, but considers them both as subjects and as objects restructured by the very economic system they have created.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on money, consumption, and materialism provides an important foundation for explaining changes in human value systems within the commodity economy. Belk (1985) emphasizes that material possessions may become central in life and are associated with traits such as possessiveness, envy, and nongenerosity. Richins and Dawson (1992) further develop the measurement of materialism as a value orientation, in which possessions no longer serve only practical needs but also become criteria for defining happiness and success. At the level of life motivation, Kasser and Ryan (1993) identify the negative side of placing financial success at the center of the personal value system. These contributions help explain why, in the commodity economy, exchange value can overshadow use value and turn money into an end in itself.

Research on ethics in markets and organizations also indicates that unethical behavior should not be understood simply as an isolated deviation. Shleifer (2004) argues that competition may encourage conduct regarded as unethical when such conduct reduces costs and creates market advantage. At the psychological level, Bandura (1999) explains the mechanism of moral disengagement through the rationalization of harmful behavior, the minimization of responsibility, and the obscuring of consequences for victims. Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) describe this phenomenon as ethical fading, in which the ethical dimension of a decision is pushed behind language such as efficiency, optimization, or organizational interest. At the organizational level, Ashforth and Anand (2003) show that corruption may be normalized when it becomes routinized, rationalized, and socialized within organizations; Moore (2008) further clarifies the role of moral disengagement in the development of organizational corruption.

In addition, studies on technology and labor show that technical innovation not only increases productivity but also restructures the position of human beings in production. Frey and Osborne (2017) assess the probability of automation across many occupational groups, thereby highlighting the risk of replacing jobs that are repetitive or easily proceduralized. However, Autor (2015) stresses the need to avoid the simplistic view that automation merely eliminates jobs; technology replaces some tasks, complements others, and changes the structure of skills. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2020) provide evidence that industrial robots can reduce employment and wages in areas strongly exposed to automation. These studies provide empirical support for the argument that technology is a product of human beings but may turn back to compete with human beings themselves in the labor market.

Finally, research on occupational stress shows that a competitive work environment can deeply affect mental health, physical health, and the biological life of human beings. Karasek (1979) develops the model in which high job demands combined with low decision latitude constitute a condition that generates mental strain. Stansfeld and Candy (2006), in a meta-analytic review, show that high job demands, low decision latitude, and an imbalance between effort and reward are risk factors for common mental disorders. More recently, Dehkordi, Khoshakhlagh, Yazdanirad, Mohammadian-Hafshejani, and Rajabi-Vardanjani (2025) synthesize evidence showing that occupational stress may be related to fertility, fertility intention, and infertility treatment. Thus, the transformation of human beings in the commodity economy is not only a moral or cognitive transformation, but one that also reaches into biological structures and private life.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, non-empirical research method grounded in social philosophy and characterized by a high level of theoretical generalization. The main approach is theoretical analysis combined with a synthesis of academic literature in order to identify the relationship between human beings and the social products they create, such as money, commodities, technology, and labor organization. The methodological focus is to move from cause to effect: from motives, behaviors, and economic structures to their manifestations in commodities, technology, morality, and social health.

The article also applies an approach that moves from phenomenon to essence. Low-quality goods, commercial fraud, dependence on money, the replacement of labor by technology, and occupational stress are treated as surface phenomena. Behind these phenomena lies a shift in the value system, in which instrumental rationality and the logic of profit risk overwhelming moral rationality and humanistic values.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Money as an Ultimate Goal that Restructures Behavior and Obscures Humanistic Values

In the commodity economy, money initially appears as a medium of exchange, a measure of value, and an instrument of circulation. However, once money is socially recognized as a universal measure, it no longer remains outside behavior but can become an end in itself. Human beings then use money not only to satisfy needs but also to define competence, status, and self-worth. This is an essential transformation: a means serving life becomes a standard that governs life.

Studies on money and materialism help explain this mechanism at the social-psychological level. Richins and Dawson (1992) show that materialism operates as a value orientation in which possession is linked to conceptions of happiness and success. Belk (1985) adds that when material possessions become central, tendencies such as possessiveness, envy, and nongenerosity may be reinforced. Vohs et al. (2006) further show that reminders of money may lead people to act more independently but also to seek

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and provide less help. From this perspective, money is not only an intermediary of exchange but also a social symbol with the capacity to transform how human beings relate to others.

Dependence on money makes exchange value more likely to overshadow use value. A product is no longer evaluated primarily in terms of its capacity to serve life, but in terms of its capacity to be converted into profit. When profit becomes the supreme standard, norms such as safety, honesty, and social responsibility risk being treated as costs to be reduced. This is the starting point of moral alienation in the commodity economy: human beings may continue to speak in the name of satisfying the market, but the essence of their behavior has shifted toward maximizing monetary gain. "In the market context, exchange decisions may weaken individuals' moral sensitivity, as monetary incentives make people more willing to accept harm to a third party than when they decide as independent individuals" (Falk & Szech, 2013, pp. 707-711). In our view, in any historical period, if human beings take money as the measure of value and profit as supreme, intentionally reducing the quality of commodities and disregarding harm to consumers, they will not be able to survive in the long term, because human society always requires high-quality commodities that are beneficial to human health.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to avoid the simplistic view that money itself makes human beings worse. Money has social power only when it is recognized, used, and reproduced by human beings in relations of exchange. Therefore, the problem does not lie in money as an object, but in the way society organizes values around money. When financial success is placed above humanistic qualities, the desire for money may be associated with negative consequences for psychological adjustment and social life, as Kasser and Ryan (1993) show. Thus, criticism of the power of money is, in essence, criticism of the value structure that assigns money a higher role than human beings. "The mere presence of money is not only a medium of exchange but can also activate a business decision frame, thereby increasing unethical intentions and behaviors in economic choice situations" (Kouchaki et al., 2013, pp. 53-61).

From a similar perspective, actors who violate serious moral values in economic activities through various money-making practices can also be evaluated critically. "Unethical conduct in organizations does not necessarily appear as an isolated deviation; it may be promoted by the mechanism of moral disengagement, through which individuals reduce their awareness of the moral content of decisions in order to legitimize behavior serving organizational or economic interests" (Moore, 2008, pp. 129-139).

In the commodity economy, every actor entering the market seeks to maximize benefits. However, this does not justify violating the objective laws of the market economy, and even less does it justify threatening the life, health, and safety of consumers for the sake of money. Money may buy almost everything, but not everything: dignity, honor, and reputation cannot be bought.

4.2. Commodities as the Crystallization of Labor, Knowledge, and the Moral Qualities of Producers

Commodities in the commodity economy are not merely objects with form, utility, and price. They are also the materialized results of labor, knowledge, technology, motives, and the value system of the producing subject. If one moves from cause to effect, human beings are the subjects who create commodities; if one moves backward from phenomenon to essence, commodities are traces through which the human beings behind them can be identified. A safe, transparent, and useful product reflects a responsible mode of behavior; a harmful, deceptive product or one that conceals information reflects a deviation in production ethics.

In the modern market, the danger is that self-interested essence is often covered by seemingly reasonable phenomena: cost optimization, efficiency improvement, demand satisfaction, packaging innovation, or brand communication. Shleifer (2004) shows that competition may spread behavior regarded as unethical when such behavior creates cost advantages. This explains why harmful commodities do not necessarily arise from a single immoral individual, but may emerge as the result of competitive pressure and distorted incentive structures.

At the psychological level, Bandura (1999) helps explain how people can cause harm while still maintaining a moral self-image: they reinterpret behavior, reduce responsibility, obscure consequences, or blame circumstances. Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) call this ethical fading: the ethical aspect of a decision disappears from attention and gives way to neutral language such as efficiency, targets, indicators, or organizational interest. In the context of commodity production, this mechanism enables producers to view reductions in quality, concealment of risks, or manipulation of information as ordinary business decisions.

When deviant behavior is repeated, it can become an organizational norm. Ashforth and Anand (2003) show that corruption is normalized through three processes: institutionalization in practice, rationalization through discourse, and socialization through internal learning. Moore (2008) also emphasizes that moral disengagement can facilitate organizational corruption because individuals become less aware of the ethical content of their decisions. From this perspective, low-quality goods are not merely a technical or market-management problem; they are manifestations of an ethical system that has been recoded according to the logic of profit.

Therefore, the proposition that "one can understand human beings by looking at commodities" is not merely a general moral intuition. It has a methodological basis: commodities are phenomena, while the behavior and value system of the producing subject constitute the essence. If society consumes and tolerates deceptive goods, it not only reflects the moral decline of producers but also reproduces that decline throughout the market environment. Conversely, a market that values transparency, quality, and social responsibility will require human beings to adjust their behavior in a more humanistic direction.

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4.3. Technology as a Creative Product of Human Beings that May Turn Back to Compete with Them

Competition in the commodity economy drives human beings to seek tools that increase productivity, reduce costs, and expand their capacity to control production processes. From this need, technology emerges as the result of human intelligence. In the early stage, technology mainly functions as a supporting tool. However, with the development of automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence, technology no longer merely enhances human capacity; it also replaces part of the labor functions of human beings. "The impact of technology on labor should be understood dialectically: technology can replace certain jobs, especially in production and low-skilled labor groups, but at the same time it may create compensatory mechanisms through the formation of new jobs and the need for reskilling" (Hotte et al., 2023, Article 122750).

Frey and Osborne (2017) show that many occupations have a high probability of automation, especially jobs involving repetitive tasks or tasks that can be easily modeled by algorithms. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2020), based on evidence from the U.S. labor market, also show that industrial robots negatively affect employment and wages in areas strongly exposed to robots. These findings reinforce the argument that technology, originally a product of human beings, can turn back into a force that competes with human beings within the sphere of labor itself.

However, the relationship between human beings and technology must be understood dialectically rather than one-sidedly. Autor (2015) warns that automation does not simply eliminate jobs; it replaces some tasks while complementing others, thereby generating new demands for skills, knowledge, and labor organization. The issue, therefore, is not to oppose technology, but to orient technology toward serving human beings. If technology is deployed solely according to the standard of reducing labor costs, human beings are easily pushed into a subordinate position. If technology is designed to enhance capacity, safety, and the dignity of labor, it can become a positive extension of human beings.

The core contradiction is that human beings create technology to liberate themselves from arduous labor, but under market conditions, this achievement of liberation may be transformed into an instrument for excluding workers. Human essence in the technological age is thus placed in a state of tension: human beings must be more creative, adapt more quickly, and protect their humanistic role against the impersonal logic of optimization. This is a new expression of alienation: human beings are not only dominated by commodities and money, but also risk being outpaced in the production system by the very technical capacity they have created.

4.4. Prolonged Occupational Pressure and the Transformation of Biological, Emotional, and Social Life

In a competitive economy, occupational pressure is no longer an isolated individual phenomenon but has become a widespread social mechanism. High performance requirements, long working hours, the risk of job loss, competition for positions, and income pressure frequently place human beings in a state of stress. At a moderate level, pressure may promote effort and the development of capacity. Yet when it is prolonged and exceeds the ability to adapt, it can cause deterioration in both physical and mental health.

Karasek's (1979) model shows that occupational stress becomes particularly serious when high job demands are combined with low worker autonomy. This is consistent with the reality of many modern workplaces, where people are required to meet demanding targets but have limited control over work pace, methods, and conditions. Stansfeld and Candy (2006), in a meta-analytic review, also show that adverse psychosocial factors at work - especially high demands, low decision latitude, and an imbalance between effort and reward - are risk factors for common mental disorders.

The impact of stress does not stop at feelings of fatigue or anxiety. When prolonged, it can impair sleep, concentration, emotional regulation, and the quality of social interaction. People in a state of overload often tend to withdraw, reduce their need for communication, and become less sensitive to others. This condition is not always genuine apathy; in many cases, it is a defensive mechanism: individuals must numb their emotions in order to continue functioning in a high-pressure environment. The cost of this defensive mechanism, however, is isolation, the breakdown of relationships, and the decline of spiritual life.

In terms of biological and personal life, Dehkordi et al. (2025) synthesize evidence showing that occupational stress may be related to fertility, fertility intention, and infertility treatment. Sabbath et al. offer a similar perspective: "Working conditions characterized by a lack of control may be regarded as a form of occupational stress affecting reproductive health; a preconception cohort study shows that lower job control is associated with reduced fecundability and a longer time to pregnancy" (Sabbath et al., 2024, pp. 497-505). This indicates that the commodity economy transforms not only consciousness and morality but also reaches into very basic layers of human life. When work occupies all of one's time, energy, and emotions, human beings do not merely lose balance between labor and rest; their ability to build a family, care for the body, and maintain intimate relationships is also affected.

Therefore, the solution cannot simply be to advise individuals to "achieve balance" while the labor structure continues to push them toward exhaustion. Mental health, living time, family relationships, and the capacity to reproduce life must be understood as economic and social values that require protection. A healthy economy cannot be measured only by productivity and profit; it must also be measured by the extent to which it allows human beings to live as human beings.

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5. CONCLUSION

The transformation of human essence in the commodity economy is a structural process that cannot be reduced to individual morality or isolated behavioral errors. Money, commodities, technology, and labor organization are all products created by human beings; yet when placed within the logic of the market, they can turn back to orient behavior, restructure value systems, and distort social relations.

Money, from being a medium of exchange, can become an ultimate goal, causing exchange value to overshadow use value. Commodities reflect not only technical capacity but also the moral qualities of the producing subject. Technology, from a tool that supports human beings, can become a force competing with human labor if governed solely by the goal of reducing costs. Occupational pressure, from a driver of development, can become a cause of decline in health, emotions, and biological life when it exceeds adaptive limits.

Therefore, the requirement is not to reject the commodity economy, money, or technology. The issue is to reposition the goal of economic development: human beings must be the center, not the sacrifice made for profit. A humanistic economy must regard transparency, social responsibility, mental health, the dignity of labor, and quality of life as substantive standards of development. Otherwise, human beings will continue to be restructured by the very products they have created, thereby weakening their role as subjects and diminishing humanistic values in social life.

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