

# Commodification and End of Ethics in International Relations

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## Abstract

This paper interrogates the practice of commodification and ethics in international relations. Compounding the dilemma of practice of ethics among states is the rise of commodification due to liberalism in a globalizing world where competition is about commercialization trends. Using an analytical qualitative and speculative approach, this paper sets to; probe whether commodification is likely to sweep away ethics in International Relations (IR), find out the practice of ethics in economic play among states, and finally highlights likely effects of commodification to ethics. The conclusion that relaxation of rules in IR due to commodification against ethics is arrived at.

**Key Words:** Commodification/ International Relations/ Ethics/ States/ International Ethics/ Extra- Territorial/ Bilateral/ Multi- Lateral/ International System/ Economic system

## 1. The Paper Study Objectives

This paper has come up with three fundamental objectives as guideline in speculating the theme commodification and ethics in international relations as follows;

- To probe whether the commodification is likely to sweep away ethics in International Relations (IR),
- To find out the practice of ethics in economic play among states, and finally
- To highlights the likely effects of commodification to ethics

## 2. The Problem Associated With Commodification

With the wave of globalization spreading fast around the world economies, the preparedness of states as core players seem to be under check especially on ethical issues arising from globalizing world where competition is about commercialization trends. Given that states in this new occurrence are much more tied by business like relationship cementing the traditional inter- state linkages, then, as the trend continues, it becomes important to probe whether it might herald the end of ethics.

## 3. Significance of This Paper

This paper, an addition to existing body of knowledge will be of great essence to scholars, inter- state policy makers, and non- state actors who are increasingly becoming major players in international policy matters as subjects and cause. The paper will be helpful in;

- Evaluations of existing Policy (ies) and creations of new where there are gaps in relation to ethics and commodification.
- Exposing actions of international players in relations to ethics and commodification as observed by various scholars.
- Redirecting the motives of international players benefiting from the effects of globalization.

## 4. Methodology

The researchers used analytical qualitative design with a speculative approach in probing whether commodification is likely to sweep away ethics in International Relations (IR) while finding out the practice of ethics in economic play and also through highlights of likely effects of commodification to ethics

### 4.1 Study Design and Analysis

In compilation of this paper, the authors opted to apply an analytical qualitative study design. While developing the paper, the writers accessed a number of relevant literatures which were critically analyzed thematically in attempting to create generalizations in the adopted group of data.

## 5. Introduction

International relations is a forceful agreement that binds states to extra- territorial obligations for it to continue in existence. A relation that constantly exists in form of bilateral and multi-lateral arrangements with diverse national characters creates a room for thought and wonder whether ethics can be upheld in this system. Ainley

(2008) notes that, “The rise of liberalism in IR has led to ethical discourse being dominated by efforts to identify a universal morality in the form of rights that all human beings can legitimately demand from their own states and from foreign states, and by claims about the obligations owed by agents to each other in respect of their rights. The legislation bias is plain to see in international ethics: law is viewed by liberals as a rational and apolitical way to regulate those relationships (between individuals or between states) traditionally governed by violence”.

Among the many developments that are encountered by contemporary International Relations (IR) has been the interest in arguments concerning ethics. After years of dominance by realist theory and political science methods to this discipline, an emerging crop of scholars, realists included, are gradually getting concerned with the discussions of not only the way states, institutions and individuals must behave, given the constraints of the international system, but the way they should behave.

International Political Theory (IPT) in essence “has brought focus onto the duties that states have towards each other (Jackson, 2000)”, towards their own citizens and towards foreign citizens as Wheeler observes, as well as what (Dunne & Wheeler, 1999) refer to “the universal rights that human beings may be able to claim against states, institutions and each other”. From the assertions the issue of responsibility is imminent but more so in Wheeler who chooses to shed clarity into it to mean responsibility to protect.

In addition, as though it is states that normally engage in unethical transactions, her subjects have natural claims to make should there be a failure to ensure observance of morality required. Observance hinted into here means the citizens too have parts. Thus in issues of commodification both states and the subjects have an equal complementing role though the former has the veto executor responsibility above the latter.

A very shapeless struggle indeed is the war against Anti- Ethics on commodification. Falk in Juma, Barenzi, and Oluoch (2012) note that “globalization is weakening state structures, especially in relation to their capacity to promote global public goods, their traditional function of enhancing the quality of life.” This is a sad state as it is likely to lead to compromising of standards.

Ethics stems from morality, which basically means good and bad but in application the former is meant when referring to ethics. This thus leads to an evaluation of the approaches to the study of ethics. The modern approaches to ethics take a law-based approach – they see morality as stemming from law of some form, and as concerned with defining duties and obligations (a moral tradition known as deontology).

This trend in morality has a long background developing probably out of the rise of Christianity, which saw morality as proceeding from divine law, which it ought to be. On the other hand, rather than thinking about morality in terms of the virtues, as the Greeks did, the Western political theorists think of it in terms of obligation. Indeed in state to state relations including her components the people, it is about obligations. These relations are entered into due to commercial motives which imply some commodity (ies) is/are the determinants.

## **6. What Commodification Is**

Various attempts have been made at defining the term. In its simplest form Karl 2004 suggests that, “commodification is sometimes termed to mean commoditization in other words it is the transformation of goods and services, as well as ideas or other entities that normally may not be considered goods into a commodity”. Not far from this view is “The Marxist understanding of commodity is distinct from the meaning of commodity in mainstream business theory. Commodity played a key role throughout Marx's oeuvre (This is French meaning a substantial body of work constituting the lifework of a writer), he considered it a cell-form of capitalism and a key starting point for an analysis of this politico-economic system” a notion advanced by Prodnik (2012).

Human beings can be considered subject to commodification in various contexts including in employment. An extreme case of commodification has been slavery, where human beings became a commodity sold and bought. Similarly and commonly, which is the traditional sense is the use of non-human animals for food, clothing, entertainment, or the like represents commodification.

There are indeed a number of benefits from commoditization if practiced in the correct sense. Since commodification notion breeds with it the action of what to produce, the use of such products, how they are made available (whether sneaked in or out of the state borders become real issues), the support and promotion of the same determine the objective of the end – leading to ethical practice or otherwise.

Perfect competition under certified and agreed rules between partner states usually lead to lower prices which would become an advantage to the consumers. Whereas where such advantage is built by for example outcompeting local industrial products then commodification and ethics meet a clashing point. It is also common knowledge that branded producers often suffer under commoditization, since the value of the brand and their ability to command price premiums can be weakened.

However, and additionally, false commoditization can create substantial risk when premier products do have substantial value to offer, particularly in health, safety and security. Examples are counterfeit drugs and generic network services within a country's geographic space (territory).

According to Douglas Rushkoff (2005), "the words commodification and commoditization were used to describe the two different processes of the assignment of value to a social good, and the movement towards undifferentiated competition, respectively: Commodification ... is used to describe the process by which something which does not have an economic value is assigned a value and hence how market values can replace other social values.

It describes a modification of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships in everyday use." Rushkoff's distinction can only be partly true, because from cultural perspective, Gloria Jean Watkins (from Hooks, 1992) refers to cultural commodification as "eating the other". The issues of domineering metamorphoses by which she means, cultural expressions, revolutionary or post modern, can be sold to the dominant culture. Any messages of social change are not marketed for their own but often to acquire a piece of what is not 'yours'.

### **7. Commodification and States Relations**

Commodification as earlier indicated refers to those processes through which social relations are reduced to an exchange relation. Any discussion of commodification today must extend to the cultural economy. It turns out that people are most sensitive to the effects of commodification in the cultural arena. The process of globalization is contingent upon the free movement of capital and its products and services into all social relations in all cultural settings. This means the end tail of commodification effects is the society whether rightly or otherwise practiced.

State regulation is viewed as the antidote of market. In the words from Dagan and Talia (2011), "the effects of state forces in regulating social relations are similar to those of market forces. This understanding has a significant implication for the structuring of the market-state debate". They further hint importantly that "It should be noted that the analogy between commodification and regulation extends not only to the vices of each of the phenomena but also to their virtues". Sentiments of Dagan and Talia support assertions of Wheeler and Jackson but they further indicate the superior nature of states as concerns both social and economic endeavours within and outside its borders.

According to Juma, Barenzi, and Oluoch (2012) within the context of this paper's theme, "Bin Laden is upheld as the "outside enemy" who threatens the American Homeland ..." and because of this, a proclamation of Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was made. Considering actually that Osama in real sense was an inside enemy resident outside USA helped in tagging Osama to make him a wanted person.

With this example, Ethics or Anti- Ethics environment defines itself by who (state) is affected most. To this end it may raise a question of when an activity, a phenomenon, behaviour, e.t.c. of an individual or state becomes global so that it solicits a joint action. When states choose to isolate unwanted forms of commodification, then a war that can be sustained by such institutions will have begun and optimistically, positively it can be won.

In the face of some known dangers of commodification for example those disguised as entertainment through movies yet avenues of dilution of ethics continue unabated within states and by full backing. Juma, Oluoch, and Monyani (2013) observe that "predatory market forces make it impossible for benevolent governments to shield their populations from the beasts of prey that lurk beyond their borders".

### **8. Ethics in Economic Play among States**

A very serious and dangerous category of scholars toy around with the issue of commodification to beautify it especially in the language of economic analysis thus suggest; "Thinking this way, talking this language, reinforces our regrettable tendency to view and treat all objects, relationships, and conditions as presumptively subject to exchange. The vocabulary of economics (at least the types of economics commonly employed by legal scholars) inclines its users to think of all resources and entitlements as commodities. Except in rare circumstances, everything, it appears -- babies, sex, blood, kidneys, clean air, the ability to have children or an abortion, privacy, and the right to equal treatment before the law should be tradeable" as contained in Legal Theory: Law and Economics site [www. http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/bridge/LawEconomics](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/bridge/LawEconomics) .

As observed, there is something wrong with such an orientation. Margaret Jane Radin (1996) summarizes as follows the strong case against commodification; "[T]he hegemony of profit-maximizing buying and selling stifles the individual and social potential of human beings through its organization of production, distribution, and consumption, and through its concomitant creation and maintenance of the person as a self-aggrandizing

profit- and preference-maximizer”. It therefore raises into mind what Marx said, “The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity -- and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally.”

This can lead to a line of thought that Commodification brings about an inferior form of human life. And I agree somehow with the assertion by Marx but not fully with his conclusion “... that people themselves, not just their institutions, must change in order to live without the market”. Yes people must change in this battle pitting commodification and ethics in international relations because they comprise the states but living without the market is not a possibility in fact it becomes an urgent and valuable necessity in our time.

Ethics is about people and their exhibited practices and hence cannot make man to ditch other essentials because of unwanted morals. There can be possible ways of doing away with threats even in laws. Even so laws being products of human beings, with inefficiencies of man, expectations of drawbacks lie in their midst too.

There is nothing inherently moral about norms such as to justify their position as foundational (slavery was, after all, a norm). Turning to the universe as legislator ‘might lead us to eat the weaker according to the laws of nature, but would hardly lead anyone nowadays to notions of justice’ (Anscombe, 1981). Anscombe continues to insinuate “And contracts, according to the concept of contract, can only be entered into knowingly: implied (social) contracts cannot ground obligation. Thus, Anscombe argued, ‘the concepts of [moral] obligation, and [moral] duty ... and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ought, ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible’.

In an analysis that has profoundly influenced many contemporary anti-commodifiers, Georg Lukacs in Nineham's (2010), developing Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, found commodification to be "the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects." He states, “[T]he principle of rational mechanisation and calculability [embraces] every aspect of life. Consumer articles no longer appear as the products of an organic process within a community (as for example in a village community). They now appear, on the one hand, as abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members and, on the other hand, as isolated objects, the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculations”.

These falsely objectified commodities are said to be reified. According to Lukacs, reification penetrates every level of intellectual and social life. False objectification -- false separateness from us -- in the way we conceive our social activities and environment reflects and creates dehumanisation and powerlessness.

Noteworthy is that commodification is as more a social problem as it is economic. Ethics is about good and bad a habit deriving from people expressed socially which is just extended to economics. If looked at in terms of rights, one can say the commodification of rights is particularly troubling. If used in reference to prostitution across borders then if a man's/ lady's freedom can be purchased, his/her freedom can also be sold. The very existence of a group purchasing the freedom makes a market, perhaps encouraging the very thing it is intended to eliminate. How the social and economic intertwine requires laws having both in mind.

Existence of anti- ethics in commodification explains further how it is hard for states to have uniformity in their dealings with other states in the international forum which is a natural behavior of these Westphalian creations. Survival as a goal of any state implies application of available options it considers advantageous, yet might be detrimental to others thus unethical. When one state is finding something ‘just useful’ to keep its population busy, another may find it against her existing defined morality.

By the mere fact that states can always renegotiate their agreements, it means signed protocols on drugs, terrorism, improper exportation/importations, arms race, movement of finances, and other similar detrimental practices are to a great extent allowed unofficially.

In general, international relations is still understood as a sphere of activity which is best understood in terms of the power relations between states. Yet, the idea of international ethics, once understood as oxymoronic, has recently surfaced as being of significance. It is now widespread acceptance that actors in the international domain regularly confront questions of unethical nature. These are questions about what would be right to do given the circumstances. Often the questions are about justice, legitimacy, human rights, democracy, the human good, and so on.

In spite of the contemporary recognition of the salience of ethical questions in the international domain, there is still a pervasive sense in the discipline and amongst practitioners, on what ethical injunctions provide, at best, a

slight constraint on policies and actions that are pursued for different reasons; and mostly for reasons of self-interest and the accumulation of national power. Given that international relations is a realm of human action.

In the contemporary world the most important actors in this domain are states. All of us, as citizens of states, participate in one way or another in inter-state activity. Our states participate in international organisations, make treaties, help fashion international law, make policies dealing with myriad issues (asylum seekers, refugees, immigration, and many others).

In ideal inter- state interactions, the practices, seen as social wholes, consist of sets of social rules which determine: who are legitimate participants (and who are not); what menu of appropriate actions is open to participants (and conversely, what sets of actions would be inappropriate for participants in these practices); what sanctions are called for in response to misconduct by participants; and, what would count as grounds for expulsion from these practices. Any deviation from legitimate rules set is an anti- ethical behavior. Commodification coupled with expectations due to open competition often relaxes rules among state parties as to water down the need for ethics.

It is important to note as in Juma, Oluoch, and Monyani (2013) that “the primary function of the state is to provide that political good of security to prevent cross- border invasions and infiltrations ...”. Indeed anti-ethics through commodification normally pop in via infiltrations thus if each state was to consider their duty as mentioned above, ethics through globalization would be an appreciable topic/practice.

## 9. Theoretical Framework

In building this study theoretical framework, it was recognized that the theory of liberalism is accelerated by the globalizing world and is under spotlight in relation to ethics when it comes to commodification. This theory is ever in competition with the international political theory (ICP). Liberalism weakens humans, states, and non-state actors resolve in the fight against ethics which in essence shapes their survival.

Commodification is good in several ways and liberalism too, since in some quarters of the globe there would be starvation, life of awkward human rights abuse and much more if it were void of commodification. In this liberalism age, against its product- commodification, culmination of IPT advances an obligation; responsibility to protect which lies with the state as much as citizens are the real breakers of ethics. Despite liberalism rationalizing and politicizing ethics with an aim of conflict free environment, it never can be attained easily because most states experience much gains out of imperfections (inequalities) created by liberalism.

## 10. Study Observations and Summary

Caney (2005) points a turn of events towards the philosophy of the Enlightenment, with cosmopolitan liberal theorists, influenced by Immanuel Kant, drawing up grand accounts of global (liberal) ethics and imagining various incarnations of a global polity as inevitably emerging.

But, the question is whether Kant’s emphasis on the centrality of duty and rules to moral life, cosmopolitan liberals support to the spread of international law and regimes’ codifying, in particular, the moral obligations of states and individuals in respect of human rights and conduct in conflict is achievable. The other side of the question is to enquire to what extent support, spread, and codification of a law regime helps in the practice of ethics.

However, liberal political philosophy (IPT) has been attacked from a number of different directions but most interestingly from the view of international ethics due to its weaknesses. It remains but not followed as Jackson *ibid* suggest above duties of states towards each other and among citizens are constant responsibilities that don’t in anyway compromise ethics in whichever situations.

Many practices towards consumerism have shifted away from "conformity" but about "difference." Adverts teach not ways of puritanical self-denial but on the never-ending self-fulfillment. They don’t advocate rigid adherence to the tastes but an increased form of individualism. Consumption is about proof. This imperative of endless difference is today the genius at the heart of capitalism especially with American standards ushered into the globe by liberalism.

Dagan and Talia *ibid* also suggest that, “though the issue of commodification was traditionally raised as an objection to the market, there are also commodification effects that support marketability. First, commodification enables the fragmentation of resources and thus facilitates conversion of one type of resource into another. Second, the uni-dimensional structure of the information regarding the value of a given resource, when translated into monetary terms, could in certain cases improve choice-making capacity by simplifying it. Third, commodification may have a liberating effect in converting resources into monetary instruments.”

“The prevailing discourse on commodification acknowledges the difficulty in drawing a clear line between market and non-market spheres. In fact, some of the most influential writings on commodification focused on the grey areas, between universal commodification and universal non-commodification” as in Radin (1996). The classic case made against commodification can be divided into two archetypical arguments: coercion-based arguments and corruption-based claims (Sandel, 2000).

Domino theory emphasizes the potential adverse effects of commodification not only on the resource being traded or on the parties to the transaction, but also on the non-market arena. The domino theory critique essentially rejects the possibility of a coexistence of a commodified version and a non-commodified version of certain resources or interactions. In Radin’s words: “The prohibition theory stresses the wrongness of commodification (1986).

Finally, Elizabeth Anderson (1993) emphasizes another dimension of the correlative effects of commodification – namely, associated with uni-dimensional modes of valuation. In her critique of marketisation, Anderson contests monistic theories of value, which assume that all forms of valuation are identical and involve “only one basic attitude or response – desire, perhaps, or pleasure – which can vary quantitatively but not qualitatively.”

### 11. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, it is notable that International political theory is struggling to keep up with developments related to ethics in commodification; neither of its principal approaches to the issues of liberalism can adequately meet our agency or practices of responsibility. I would concur with pessimism as Kirsten Ainley suggests in her article *Beyond Individualism ...* (2008) that, “The concept of responsibility is gaining political currency in contemporary international relations”. My position is built on statements by other world leaders like Clinton when he launched his campaign in 1991-1992. He expressed that,

“The Reagan-Bush years have exalted private gain over public obligation, special interest over the common good, wealth and fame over work and family. The 1980s ushered in a gilded age of greed and selfishness, of irresponsibility and excess, and of neglect ... To turn America around, we’ve got to have a new approach, founded on our most sacred principles as a nation, with a vision for the future. We need a new covenant, a solemn agreement between the people and their government to provide opportunity for everybody, inspire responsibility throughout our society and restore a sense of community to our great nation. (Clinton, 1991)”

He went further stating a strong will that often lacks in the fight against unethical practices in commodification thus stating in his inaugural address that: ‘[w]e must do what America does best: offer more opportunity to all and demand responsibility from all. Let us all take more responsibility, not only for ourselves and our families but for our communities and our country’ (Clinton, 1993).” And in support of his views, fellow adherent to the ‘Third Way’, Tony Blair, has made responsibility a feature of his politics throughout his premiership. In his first speech as Prime Minister to the Labour Party conference, Blair (1997) declared that “a decent society is not based on rights, it is based on duty especially to one another...To all given opportunity; from all responsibility is demanded”. The third way represents a group of thinkers apart from individualists and states who go beyond rationalization to adherence to social responsibility.

Additionally, when he addressed the Global Ethics Foundation he argued that: “... you can’t build a community on opportunity or rights alone. They need to be matched by responsibility and duty. That is the bargain or covenant at the heart of modern civil society. Frankly, I don’t think you can make the case for Government, for spending taxpayers’ money on public services or social exclusion – in other words for acting as a community – without this covenant of opportunities and responsibilities together. (Blair, 2000)”

These three represent a line of thought that many are holding but to date no common action seems to be developing in the horizon of international relations to solidify it as a common agenda requiring joint approach.

From the arguments and excerpts herein, it is clear that;

- Liberalism is good (see Dagan and Talia above) just as it may be associated with negativities in relation to commodification.
- Both the state and their subjects have roles in enhancing ethics in the process of commodification though the states have a superior responsibility.
- The states being what they are in IR; with interests and ego, may not foreseeably conform to ethics on commodification where gains outweigh negative effects unless pro- social responsibility leaders make

resolves but still this is untenable unless a joint Universal Rights Against Unethical Commodification Practices (URAUCP) is instituted and given full backing via international protocols.

As the world faces climatic distortions and states resolve its menace jointly, an eye should be opened on this aspect of ethics emanating from commodification. The more relaxation on this area, the greater deterioration on ethics and possibility of its decline in international relations.

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