In this chapter, we plait three features of mercantifers together to outline a theory of them. Mercantifers can change their spheres of influence over time; they incorporate forms of social control to determine that sphere of influence and to set and enforce rules; and they exist because of so-called Market failure. Although this theory is couched in terms of a manufactured product, we assert that it is equally applicable to any thing, action or idea produced in any society.

Making mercantifers

Presume the existence of an animal spirit, intent on innovation, which may be associated with an individual person or a body corporate. It may also be spurred into activity by a variety of motivations and causes. Animal spirits are indicated by open trajectories.

Presume also a community of persons connected to each other by many patterns of relationships, to shared aspirations and beliefs and to common experience. This community contains the animal spirits of persons, as an envelope contains papers. But unlike the (passive) envelope, the community actively permits, encourages or facilitates those spirits to find collective expression.

Presume that animal spirits constantly produce new inventions of things, actions and ideas.

Presume that persons make mistakes so that the patterns of relationships to which they are linked are rarely precisely replicated in time.

These presumptions mean that, in a particular society, the resident persons and the relationships by which they are linked are constantly changing.
We illustrate mercantifer-making by supposing that a person is spurred to activity involving the design, production and distribution of a new type of automobile. Imagine that this new automobile is amphibious and can be flown, is made completely of waste materials which do not include metal or plastic, is very low cost and is recycled when the fuel cell is exhausted. Moreover, it can be stored on a shelf when not in use.

We do not presume that the activity of making and maintaining mercantifers is confined to the automobile producer upon which this illustration is focussed. Indeed, the primitive presumptions we have made imply that the impulse for this type of activity is widely dispersed in society. This illustration should be set in the context of a number of similar developments to which the description of the automobile mercantifer, *mutatis mutandis*, applies.

The new automobile embodies configurations of things, actions and ideas which are constructed to be as unlike existing commodities as possible. It has also been described in terms of the functions that it might serve. From the point of view of the mercantifer-maker, a product becomes a commodity only when the configurations of which it is composed can be incorporated into trajectories by the medium of mercantifiers. Thus, the production and dissemination of social knowledge and the creation of socially acceptable uses are both part of the transformation of configurations of things, actions and ideas into commodities. In the case of the new automobile, this involves assisting persons to regard it as a commodity which potentially performs changes to trajectories. Hence, all commodities are services, in the sense of Hill (1977). However, the nature of the commodity is not given but is socially constructed within the mercantifer concerned.

The collective nature of the new automobile mercantifer makes the new automobile into a transactable commodity which can be distinguished from others. The processes by which this occurs are varied and susceptible to change over time. Commodities are, therefore, neither more nor less immutable or “out there” than social relationships or political arguments.

The first choice the prospective seller must take is whether or not she will produce and distribute the automobile using mercantifers. If she commands sufficient economic or social power over communal relationships, as would an extreme dictator or pure monopolist, it may be possible for her to eschew the use of mercantifers. If that is the case, she will collect all the resources required to design, produce and distribute the automobile by command. The limits of command are set by the