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Totems, Fetishes, and Enchanted Modernity: Hegelian Marxism Confronts Idolatry

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Totems, Fetishes, and Enchanted Modernity: Hegelian Marxism Confronts Idolatry

Abstract
Translation is an odd business. In the Preface to the Phenomenology Hegel has a wonderful characterization of Understanding as being metaphorically akin to a table of contents compared to the rest of the book: i.e., skeletal and reliant for meaning and substance upon something external to itself:


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Comments
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The interesting phrase is the point where Hegel says that Understanding leads to turning things into “etwas Totem” — a little totem, i.e., an ordinary, profane object invested with impersonal powers via the projective practices of those that alienate their own energies and invest them in an external object — transforming the object into a powerful and sacred Thing over and against the practitioners. Hegel is here using ‘totem’ as the equivalent of fetish object. This treating ‘totem’ as ‘fetish’ is unsurprising since a full grasp of totemism would come nearly five decades after his seminal work and, ultimately, both fall under the heading of idolatry. The strange thing is that every major English translation of this passage has turned “etwas Toten” into something quite the opposite of Hegel’s meaning, probably thinking of “etwas Toten.”

Baillie gives us this: “If the specific determination (say even one like magnetism) is one that in itself is concrete or actual, it all the same gets degraded into something lifeless and inert, since it is merely predicated of another existing entity, and not known as an immanent living principle of this existence …” ([1910] 1967: 112).

The standard Miller translation renders the idea of the totem as such: “Understanding degrades it into something lifeless, merely predicing it of another existent thing” (1977: 32).

Pinkard’s excellent but unpublished translation goes in the same direction: “However much determinateness such as, for example, magnetism, is in itself concrete, that is, is actual, it is nonetheless downgraded to the status of something lifeless since it is merely predicated of another existence” (unpublished: §53).

What Baillie, Miller, and Pinkard miss is that ‘totem’ ("etwas Totem") was not yet another instance of Hegelese (tot = dead, etc.) and he was not using the word *Toten* (kill) but an ethnological term that had been coined as late as 1791.

This is the only explicit reference to the “totem” in the *Phenomenology* (see also §689) but it is not the only discussion of totemism in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* or the rest of his works. Totems and fetishes were all the rage among European intellectuals in Hegel’s day and an interesting line can be drawn between those that viewed the
totem and fetishes as things alien to civilization (Hegel) and those that saw a very uncomfortable parallel between ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ practices of clan society and the idolatry of modern Christianity (Bernasconi 1998). According to Smith (1988: 38): “Hegel may not have read de Brosses, but he did read T. Edward Bowditch, whose writings on fetishism were based both on de Brosses and on Bowditch’s experience as an emissary to the Ashanti and Fanti tribes…. Hegel also read the travel narratives of Cavazzi (1691) and Bruce (1744).” In an editorial addition to the English translation of the 1844 manuscripts we are informed that Marx read a German translation of de Brosses but we are also misinformed by the editor when he states that Marx introduces the term fetishism in 1844 (see Marx 1964: 243; cf. Marx and Engels 1975: 147).

When we are in the presence of totems, fetishes, etc., we know we have entered the domain of idolatry and the mechanisms of alienation that sublate the concrete into the sacred realm of what Marx calls “phantom objectivities.” When we get to Marx’s earliest references to the fetish we see him making contact with Charles de Brosses for whom fetishism was “something like a general theory of projection” applicable not only to ‘primitives’ but the moderns as well (Smith 1988: 33-36). Marx’s first reference to the fetish appears in 1842 in “Debates on the Freedom of the Press” (Marx and Engels 1975: 147) and in “The Leading Article in No. 179 of the Kölnische Zeitung” we find a veritable flurry of ‘fetishism’ in Marx’s response to Herr H. (Hermes):

Before going further into these ‘silly’ explanations of the leading article on the subject of ‘scientific research’, let us sample for a moment the ‘philosophy of religion’ of Herr H., his ‘own science’!

‘Religion is the basis of the state and the most necessary condition for every social association which does not aim merely at achieving some external aim.’

*The proof:* ‘In its crudest form as *childish fetishism* it nevertheless to some extent raises man above his sensuous desires which, if he allowed himself to be ruled exclusively by them, could *degrade him to the level of an animal* and make him incapable of fulfilling any higher aim.’

The author of the leading article calls fetishism the ‘*crudest form*’ of religion. He concedes, therefore, what all ‘men of science’ regard as established even without his agreement, that ‘*animal worship*’ [totemism] is a *higher* form of religion than fetishism. But does not animal worship degrade man below the animal, does it not make the animal man’s god?

And now, indeed, ‘fetishism’! Truly, the erudition of a penny magazine! Fetishism is so far from raising man above his sensuous desires that, on the contrary, it is ‘the *religion of sensuous desire*’. Fantasy arising from desire deceives the fetish-worshipper into believing that an ‘inanimate object’ will give up its natural character in order to comply with his desires. Hence the crude desire of the fetish-worshipper *smashes* the fetish when it ceases to be its most obedient servant (1975: 189).

The basic outline of Marx’s mature theory of the fetishism of the commodity is already on display here: human hyper-praxis generates not only a surplus of action and material goods but also an excess of consciousness (Con + ΔCon) reflected back or shining into the material dimension. The real returns in the form of enchanted and enigmatic symbolic shapes that evade conceptual comprehension at the level of the imaginary (intersubjective relations). For the ‘primitive’ the fetish is a fulcrum for increasing personal strength and when they no longer get the job done they are discarded as so much waste. In the modern world our own creations (both real and ideal) become hypostatized, inverted, twisted, and awe-inspiring and we become alien to ourselves. However, far from feeling as though we are the masters of manipulation, we are pursued through time and space by the terrifying spectres of residual impersonal life — the objective phantoms. For Marx, clearly, fetishism was a universal feature of capitalist society that had roots in primitive social organization.

**Fetishism**

‘Fetishism’ is derived from *feitico*, a word coined “by Portuguese traders in 1481 to refer to the cult objects of the Ashanti and the Fanti peoples of Western Africa” (Smith 1988: 29). A fetish is a magical charm or enchanted object. “The derivation of *feitico* — from the Latin *facticius*, ‘made by art,’ which in turn derives from *factio*, ‘doing or ‘acting’ — clearly suggests the manufactured origin of the charm” (Ibid.). From one angle, fetishism is
almost inevitable as a symptom of cultural production (see Becker 1973: 236) whereas for others fetishism is a problem to be solved as a prerequisite to get humanity back on the road to rational self-actualization. Our own position is that fetishism is not inevitable but is a retrograde position for those living through the nightmare of the downfall of the absolute. Where a void opens in the place where there had once been society (Durkheim [1897] 1951: 377) we are transported into a negative heaven of self-destruction, magic, fetishism, and monsters. Pessimistically, we may read social disintegration as the descent into the “night of the world” (Hegel) or as a necessary moment in the the life of Spirit working out its contradictions. In his lectures on religion, Hegel views fetishism as a marker of primordial chaos and unstable social organization: “The Negroes have an endless multitude of divine images which they make into their gods or their ‘fetishes’ (a corrupted Portuguese term). The nearest stone or butterfly, a grasshopper, a beetle, and the like — these are their Lares — indeterminate, unknown powers that they have made themselves; and if something does not work out or some unhappiness befalls them, then they throw this fetish away and get themselves another” (1988: 234-35). Fetish objects are rickety household gods symptomatic of disturbed and embryonic social order.

Prior to Marx’s deployment of fetishism in Capital, the idea of the fetish, if not the word itself, appears amidst vigorous discussions of economic theology, such as those surrounding hoarding and mercantilism. Examples include his description of mercantilist political economists as fetishist Catholics that treated property (land, gold, and money) “only as an objective substance confronting men” ([1844] 1964: 128). The “Luther of Political Economy,” Adam Smith, replaced “this external, mindless, objectivity of wealth” with an understanding of capital as “man’s externalization in the thing.” Marx equated economic production with “the act of externalizing, the process of alienating” ([1844] 1964: 129). Marx critiques the fetishistic qualities of money, citing long passages from Goethe’s Faust and Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens, on money’s capacity to equip its possessor with social prestige and enhanced powers ([1844] 1964: 166). Money operates fetishistically under capital, such that its “properties [become] … the properties and powers of its possessor” ([1844] 1964: 167). Money beautifies the ugly, attaches “twenty-four feet” to the lame, bestows honors upon the disgraced and talents upon the stupid. Money is the “visible divinity,” the “alienated ability of mankind” appearing as “divine power” that can turn “an image into reality and reality into a mere image” ([1844] 1964: 168).

Capital and religion install humans in alienating systems powered by their own extracted energies. The “more the worker spends himself [sacrifices in production], the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects … [and] the poorer he himself — his inner world — becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself” (Marx [1844] 1964: 108). The energies of workers were used against them: “labor for the worker … is not his own, but someone else’s … he belongs , not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual — that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity” (Marx [1844] 1964: 111). To Marx, the fetish belonged to early phases of social production alienated and possessed by “the gods,” but under capital “not the gods, not nature, but only man himself …[is revealed as] this alien power over man” ([1844] 1964: 115). Despite the departure of the gods, clear vision of capital’s social ontology of capital was obscured by smog, as well as the glitter of gold, the shine of silver, and the allure of commodities, all of which Marx comprehended by redeploying the ethnological fetish.

Marx likely encountered the fetish and its attendant economic theology in the seminal writings of de Brosses. Max Müller’s lectures characterize the concept of the fetish as the “ancient worship of certain terrestrial and material objects, called fetiche, among the African negroes (he meant to say, by those who visited the African negroes), and which for this reason I shall call Fetischisme.” (1901: 60). De Brosses believed that “all nations first received a primeval divine revelation, then forgot it, and then began again from the beginning — viz. with fetishism.” The only exceptions were “the Jews, the chosen people of God” who “were never fetish-worshippers,” a claim that Müller challenges given “many traces of fetishism in the Old Testament [including golden calves]” (1901: 62). Reflecting Protestant criticism of Catholic idolatry of “graven images,” readers of de Brosses believed that the Portuguese traders, immersed in “popular Roman Catholicism” were “themselves fetish-worshippers” who either interpreted native approaches to objects through their own theology or projected their own practices onto the natives. Either way, these sailors and traders were Catholics who “were perfectly familiar with a feitico, an amulet or talisman; and probably all carried with them some beads, or crosses, or images, that had been blessed by their priests before they started their voyage” (1901: 63).

Rather than accepting trader’s accounts of fetishism at face value, contemporary critical theorists tend to view the fetish as “a product of the fears of the Europeans who construed it, rather than of those upon whom it was projected” (McNally 2011: 202). The notion that Portuguese Catholic traders and early-modern sailors were fetishists was widespread, and some writers made an “explicit assertion of identity between African fetishes and Catholic sacramental objects” (Pietz 1987: 39). One such was Willem Bosman, a Calvinist, Dutch contemporary of de Brosses, who argued that the affinity between European Catholics and African “fetishists” gave them a comparative advantage for religious conversion: “Roman-Catholicks [sic] would succeed better than we should, because they already agree in several particulars, especially in their ridiculous ceremonies” (Bosman [1705] 1907: 154). The African fetish was conflated with Roman Catholic idols and the Protestant (Calvinist) critique of idolatry was projected onto the “fetishist” native people they encountered (McNally 2011: 207).

Those who first encountered “fetishists” in the wild were not only Catholics subject to traditional religious practice, but capitalists, subjects of exchange value. European capitalists developed an elaborate narrative of native fetishism as a defense mechanism, a projective interpretation to “regulate their shock over the ostensibly perverse, non-market values to which Africans subscribed” (McNally 2011: 201). Europeans, disoriented by “the refusal of Africans to part with certain goods irrespective of what was offered in return, even substantial amounts of gold … invented the African fetish” (2011: 201) in order to prevent the denaturalization of capitalism’s framework of exchange value. The disruption of the capitalist unconscious was forestalled by projecting fantastic, regressive, childlike, and irrational notions of fetishism to account for non-European relations to things.

The “first and central theme of the fetish idea [was] its status as a value-bearing material object” (Pietz 1987: 40). From the standpoint of European market logic, Africans operated with a “differential value system,” over-valuing “trifles” and “trinkets,” trading objects worth little to Europeans but shining with novelty value to Africans, while dramatically under-valuing gold, and ivory, trading them out-of-all proportion to their dense market value (Pietz 1987: 41). Portuguese traders were fascinated by, even fixated upon, the fetish because these objects and practices reflected in bizarre form their own market-based, calculated, yet still magical, submission to exchange value. De Brosses had an expansive definition of fetish that included objects that were not only “made by hand,” but also “artificial … unnatural, magical, enchanted, and enchanting” ([1901: 66). Fetish objects, “amulets and similar half-sacred trinkets,” were traded in markets and became, as a result, commodities: “the trade in such articles was perfectly recognized in Europe during the middle ages, as it is still among the negroes of Africa. A manufacturer or seller of them was called fetiscero” (1901: 66). Müller notes that the word fetish became common-coin in the Portuguese language, “being used in its diminutive form as a term of endearment, meu feticinho, meaning my little fetish, or darling” (1901: 64).

An important foundation for the defetishization of the fetish, in which it appears as a projection of Europeans upon Africans, is Bosman’s description of “fetiche” and “fetisheer” (see especially [1705] 1907: 146-156). Bosman account reveals that fetishes were so fascinating and destabilizing for Europeans because these objects were immune from the normal laws of exchange value ([1705] 1907: 118-121), while the fetishist natives exhibited “degenerate vices … sloth and idleness; to which they are so prone that nothing but the utmost necessity can force them to labour,” especially for gain ([1705] 1907: 117). Despite this apparent lack of work ethic, the natives were nevertheless desirous of material goods and money, however “they set so small a value upon them, that if they meet with a very great loss, you can never perceive it by their carriage, it never robs them of an hours repose; and they are no sooner at their resting-place, but, like the beasts, they sleep perfectly undistributed by any melancholy reflections” ([1705] 1907: 118). It was bad enough that natives lacked proper mourning for lost wealth, but they also casually wore “Gold Fetiche” adornments whose high market value Bosman took the trouble to calculate:

a sort of coral here called conte de terra, which is sometimes of a quadruple value to gold, as also a sort of blue coral, which we call Agrie ... [which] is so much valued, that tis generally weighed against gold. They are very fond of our hats, never thinking they pay too much for them. Their arms, legs and waist are adorned with gold ... about their arms they also wear ornamental rings made of ivory, gold, silver & C. about their necks strings or chains of gold, and coral ... and I remember to have seen several of these strings or chains worth above one
hundred pounds sterling. But these are the jewels; and they who want them are no company for those who have them ([1705] 1907: 119).

Bosman was concerned with a total arrangement of emergent market values among natives. His account concurs with McNally in that Africans, by refusing to treat specific material objects as commodities possessed of exchange value, “were exposing as fictive all claims for the universality and naturalness of the European market-economy” (2011: 203; see also Goux 1990: 158). Marx noted that comparisons of exchange value with other value systems threatened to denaturalize capital. He wrote that the “whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production” (1977: 168). Or, as Goux says, when “universal law is recognized, idols are destroyed” (1990: 159).

Marx’s writings on fetishism were independent from the enormous late 19th and early 20th interest in psychosexual fetishism. Goux (1990) presents us with an attempt to translate the Freudian/psychoanalytic theory of sexualized fetishism into the language of Marx. A Freudian fetish is an imaginary “phallic object” that masks a void in the symbolic order, conceals the absence of the mOther’s phallus, and shields the fetishist from the mortal threat of castration. Is Marx’s commodity fetishism akin to sexual fetishism? Can shoe fetishists be comprehended as an over-focused subcategory of commodity fetishism whose sniffing, licking, and rubbing are confined within a single product category?

Fetishists fight a miniature revolt against symbolic sources of constraint. They deploy their fetishes to disavow (deny) the “castrating” paternal function, the symbolic Big Daddy of language and law possessing the power to say “no!” to the fetishists’ enjoyment. The fetish object is a “substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis” that the fetishist “believe[s] in and does not want to give up.” The prestige of the fetish allows the fetishist to not see or admit that others (mother) are subject to symbolic authority. The fetish object covers the “wound” of castration with pleasure-charged imagery (Freud [1927] 2000: 4535). To the leading psychoanalytic theorists of fetishism and perversion, Chasseguet-Smirgel, “the fetish spares the fetishist” by allowing the disavowal of the father’s “(genital) capacities and to accomplish a (magic) transmutation of reality” by sustaining the illusion that the pervert is always and already superior to any external agent of authority, and hence free to enjoy without limit (1985: 78-80). The fetish-as-imaginary-phallus becomes the primary pleasure port between the fetishist and the mOther. As Lacan puts it, “the whole problem of the perversions consists in conceiving how the [fetishist] … identifies with the imaginary object of [the mother’s] desire … the phallus” (2006: 462-3).

Both sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism cloak “the domination of subjects by universal symbolic products,” de-authorizing symbolic authority and structural power. The difference lies in the “thing” shielded by the fetish, the mother’s penis absconditus, versus value as economic structure (1990: 157). Regardless of the domain of fetishism — religious, economic, and sexual — fetishism involves “over Valorization of a thing” (Goux 1990: 158) that blots out structural systems of language, law, and value, allowing the fetishist the illusion of unfettered “enjoyment” of the Big Other. Fetishists therefore deny the “universal symbolic product” that mediates social relationships, the mediating third (value) that Marx theorized in comparison to “language and to God” (Goux 1998: 38; see also Marx [1857] 1973: 162-3).

**Commodity Fetishism**

In *Capital* Marx says that from one point of view, the view of use-value, a commodity is just ordinary. “But, as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful that if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (1977: 163-64). Labor products or ‘utilities’ are easy to grasp. Commodities, on the other hand, are enigmatic, mysterious, and reflective. The first thing to point out is that Marx here continues his dialectical analysis from the beginning of the chapter, where the commodity is dissected into two aspects: real and ideal, utility and value; secondly, the commodity character, the thing of value, is an emergent quality; thirdly, this weird emergent quality only occurs when a product stands in a relation to other products and undergoes an inversion; finally, the...
commodity resists comprehension as it appears to consciousness as a weird, reified, transcendent thing. A commodity, unlike an ordinary labor product, comes to possess a “mystical character” (Ibid: 164). To penetrate the mystique of the thing one has to trace back not to the productive functions of concrete laboring of individuals (value does not flow from the veins of workers or the nuts and bolts of the means of production) but to the alienation inherent in social labor and the reductions of the concrete to abstractions (duration, specifically socially necessary labor time).

In a difficult passage Marx says that there is a “substitution” process at work in the appearance of the commodity: the socially subjective aspect (value) is projected onto the reflective material carrier such that, e.g., the wooden chair is imagined to be a crystal of value first and foremost. This substitution is a feature of the crude materialism of bourgeois economics as well as fetishists in general: “According to [Ricardo], a coffee-pot would be fixed capital, but coffee circulating capital. The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the natural properties of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them” (Marx [1857] 1973: 687).

Further, the relations between people appear to be the relations between things; and mere things take on lives of their own, as if they, not the producers, were the real subjects of the production and exchange process (Ibid: 164-65). In other words, social relations take on “the fantastic form” and that a proper analogy for this process of alienation and projection must be found in the “misty realm of religion” (Ibid: 165). Decisively, Marx says that this “fetishism” is “inseparable from the production of commodities” (Ibid: 165). In other words, where there are commodities there must be fetishism. It is important to remember that commodities, at least in their simple and embryonic forms, predate capitalism by millennia so the fetishism we find in capitalism is only a specific and modern form of practices that stretch back into premodernity — not just ‘economic’ practices but religious, magical, and gift-giving as well. Fetishism is then, as Marx says, a social “fact” (Ibid: 164) in that the commodity confronts humans as something external and coercive (Ibid: 1053). In other words, the power of the fetish goes beyond merely subjective problems of ideology and wrong-headedness (Pilling 1980). Even though we create these things they wind up lording over us. If the command of commodities were a case of simple domination or merely a problem of intersubjective confusion we could effectively fight against them with ordinary resistances and enlightenment. However, the command of commodities is also akin to the realm of religion in that the commodity is not simply a thing of fear but also of wonder and adoration. In other words, the commodity and the system that produces the commodity are authoritative (legitimately dominating or valid) in the eyes of those who sacrifice daily to this bizarre god. The driver that keeps the system going is rooted not simply in greed, personal interests, and passions but, more troubling, in the entire way of thinking that emerges from social life: division, abstraction, reduction, comparison, equating, relating, measuring, projection, identification, etc. Hence, if the commodity is an absurdity (Ibid: 169) we are likely to be stuck with it or some other substitute absurdity for a long, long time.

Thinking our way out of this mess is akin to mortals waging war against the immortals, Titans, and furies and our proposed solutions (the general intellect, automation, etc.) are just as absurd as the contradictions they purport to solve. Even Marx, when he attempts to imagine an alternative runs into trouble when he says “Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men…” (Ibid: 171). Stop right there. As we know, human assemblage (association) is productive of special effects (Durkheim [1897] 1951: 310) and as soon as any ‘effects’ (totems, commodities, etc.) are subject to division and a variability of distribution (Marx 1977: 172) we are confronted with taboos, restrictions, repressions, and the principle of just distribution (nomos). This is also known as the can o’ worms. Since we don’t have instincts we have to rely on repressions and therein lies the history of humanity: the perpetual confrontation with the surplus enigmatic something, some kind of weird force (Breasted 1933) that stalks us both in our dreams and our waking lives.

Money Fetishism
Marx’s sustains a critique of money, gold, and silver as fetish objects across many of his writings. For example, in the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes that, under capitalism, “wealth as a fetish must be crystallized in a particular substance, gold and silver are its appropriate embodiment” ([1859] 1989: 155). Money represents “commodities congealed in their first metamorphosis” ([1859] 1970: 151) possessing a “social (symbolic) property” that represents the alienated “social relationships” of producers ([1857]1973:160). Those who possess money, possess “social power in the form of a thing” ([1857]1973:157-8), and as the “god among commodities” ([1857]1973: 221), money “dominates him and he worships it” (1978a: 50). Marx comments favorably upon the writings of Jansenist Catholic political economist, Pierre Boisguillebert, who ardently critiques mercantilist gold fetishism as “the blindly destructive greed for gold” that “like a fantastic Moloch, demands all physical wealth as a sacrifice” ([1859] 1989: 54). In one of Marx’s many analyses of hoarding as money fetishism, Boisguillebert is cited in reference to human sacrifice and the pursuit of money. Silver and gold are “idols” or “divinities to whom more goods, important needs, and even human beings were sacrificed and continue to be sacrificed, than were ever sacrificed to the false divinities even in blind antiquity” ([1859] 1970: 125 fn.).

A hoarder-money fetishist becomes a “martyr to exchange-value, a holy ascetic seated at the top of a metal column” ([1859] 1970:134). Such human sacrifice involved in the consecration of cash is described in detail by Taussig (2010). In the “baptism of bills” in the Cauca Valley, children’s souls are figuratively sacrificed by godparents who forestall and engross the magical powers of the baptismal ceremony by hiding money on the infant, leaving the child unbaptized and the money animated by magic powers of reproduction (2010: 126-8). Money fetishism inverts consciousness leading to the same “personification of things and the reification of persons” as capital ([1867] 1976: 1054). Money is here equated with other moral objects such as gifts and trophies that undergo fetishistic personification, representing a personified bond between things that mask bonds between groups (Mauss 1954: 10; on trophies as moral objects, see Krier and Swart 2016).

**Capital Fetishism**

Compared to the fetishism of commodities almost no work has gone into the problem of capital fetishism (according to Google Scholar roughly 40 percent of all the articles, books, and chapters on ‘capital fetishism’ are attributed to four individuals, all regular participants in the Symposium for New Directions in Critical Social Theory: David Norman Smith, Tony Smith, Mark P. Worrell, and Dan Krier.

Just as the commodity confronts consciousness as an enigma, capital itself is mystified (Marx 1977: 1052). “The capitalist production process is thus successfully transformed into a complete mystery, and the origin of the surplus value present in the product completely withdrawn from view…. What is also brought to fulfilment here is the fetishism peculiar to bourgeois economics, which transforms the social, economic character that things are stamped with in the process of social production into a natural character arising from the material nature of these things” (1981a: 303). The recurring problem is the confusion of the abstract for the concrete — the subjective inversion of the moral for the amoral. This has consequences, including:

The fetishism peculiar to the capitalist mode of production from which it arises. This consists in regarding economic categories, such as being a commodity or productive labour, as qualities inherent in the material incarnations of these formal determinations or categories (Ibid: 1046).

The fetishism of capital extends to the regarding of capital as a “thing” (Ibid: 982, 1052) rather than a system of social relations as well as the identification of the moral and the physical, e.g., since money is gold, gold is money (Ibid: 982). Human labor objectified under the capitalist regime is appropriated (estranged, alienated) and then belongs not to the producer but to the one who purchases labor power. Everything, then, “belongs” to the capitalist and never to the laborers (Ibid: 1052). We cannot, as workers, imagine a world without capital because it appears to us that everything productive is “inseparable” from capital. As far as reified consciousness is concerned, the choice simply comes down to capitalist production (i.e., production) or nothing. And the sheer “scale” and “scope” of the capitalist system means that everything above the ontic plane of the individual assumes the shape of something autonomous, inevitable, and unstoppable. This reminds us of Weber’s sober
comment that the capitalism of the 20th Century was already an “unalterable order” and that one either submitted to market imperatives or died in the streets (1930: 19).

Everything in society seems to be a “direct offshoot of capital” and therefore inseparable from it. To choose life (as slow motion collective sacrifice) is necessarily, it seems, to choose capitalism, a form of life in which the personal is made impersonal, things take on qualities of people and people are reduced to the life of inanimate objects to be manipulated. Everything becomes “alien, objective, ready-made, existing without … intervention, and frequently even hostile …” (Ibid: 1054). Everywhere we look we see value and commodities. Even objects that are no longer commodities are treated and regarded as if they were commodities: it is as if we are surrounded by the ghosts of the past, present, and future as we stagger through the commodity world. Even the trained critic, the professional Marxist cannot elude the grasp of the commodity and exclaims from time to time “Just look at all these commodities!” when all around you are merely useful objects. Comrade, this is just a chair, have a seat and relax for a while. “Under certain circumstances a chair with four legs and a velvet covering may be used as a throne. But this same chair, a thing for sitting on, does not become a throne by virtue of its use-value” (Marx 1977: 997).

The fetishism of capital also extends to the splitting or compartmentalization of capital into different species (Massing 1949: 13; see also Herf 1984: 55): productive and finance. In volume three of Capital, Marx says that “In interest-bearing capital, the capital relationship reaches its most superficial and fetishized form. Here we have $M' - M$ , money that produces more money, self-valorizing value, without the process that mediates the two extremes” (1981b: 515). For a theorist who routinely ridiculed the mediating moment in the spiral of reason as a bunch of crypto-Hegelian mumbo jumbo this is quite a statement (see Worrell and Krier 2015). Indeed, we find Marx’s actual procedure is to decompress the general formula for capital in such a way that the “mediator that vanishes” is brought back into view as the essential aspect of the critical analysis — but as we suggest further below, this decompression does not go far enough. Whatever the case, capital comes to be viewed as a self-acting subject, an “automaton” disconnected from production and “as a mere number that increases by itself” (1981b: 520). It is as if capital is a spirit that might inspire anyone to become a capitalist — indeed, perhaps workers are just capitalists in training! (Ibid: 522). I (Worrell) saw this first hand in a factory that sold corporate shares to employees at a slight discount but limited them to only a handful at a time; for weeks after the purchase of, say, nine shares of Philip Morris stock, they would chat about their gains at the water cooler and temporarily forget that they were disposable pack mules.

On the one hand, capitalism is the “slow sacrifice” of humanity in the satanic mills and Asian gulags, but, on the other hand, capital is a mysterious geometric spiraling of numbers, higher and higher (Ibid.). One is captained by earnest men of god who make good things for living while the other kind of capitalism was dominated by nefarious bloodsuckers making money out of money. Father Coughlin, the Depression-era antisemitic radio demagogue, made great use out of this old political-theological division (see Worrell 2008). But Marxists have fallen for this split as well. Hilferding ([1910] 1981) provides a textbook example of capital fetishism and it falls apart on the notion of inherent value and the value “storage” function of commodities. Here is the death of the critical spirit. For more on capital fetishism as it applies specifically to our leading critical spirits consult Worrell (2009).

The Fetishes of Marxism

Virtually every Marxism that has existed consists of elaborate plans on how to break into prison. Every critique and analysis seems to begin with faulty presuppositions that guarantee failure as if they were hacking through the commodity jungle with dull machetes of imprecise concepts. If you think about it, even the common phrase “commodity production” is a fetish expression — it confuses what Marx calls the “real side” or sometimes the “simple” with the mystified, abstract side. The whole point of conceiving production, exchange, and consumption as a “proper syllogism” (Marx [1859] 1970: 194) is to keep the “links” in the totality of the system (Ibid: 204) critically separated rather than running them all back together in a restoration of the terrible unity — a move replicated in the Resultate bolted on at the end of Capital. This move amounts to a shift from the socially realistic back to a savage realism. In other words, to say “commodity production” is fatalistic. It presupposes so
much and misplaces the precise coordinates and aspects of alienation such that we cannot escape the power of the commodity and, as such, Marxism usually devolves into alternative ownership schemes rather than a genuinely revolutionary program for human liberation. If a commodity (a thing bearing value) is produced we should be able to find value (a non-material subject-substance) flowing from the veins of works and oozing out of the means of production. To borrow a line from Goethe, they mock themselves with their own words. In other words, where Marx tends to clearly distinguish the “real side” of production from the abstractions (1977: 981) Marxism runs them together with the result being the reification of value and the ontic degradation of analysis into naive realism that is alien to the mature Marx and critical sociology.

In the section of capital fetishism Marx says “Since — within the process of production — living labour has already been absorbed into capital …” (1977: 1052) and so on. This is certainly a true statement, if, that is, one is viewing things from the standpoint of capital or the negative capitalist, the Marxist, who dreams night and day of seizing the means of production. From a properly critical point of view, the notion that concrete labor is “already … absorbed into capital” (emphasis added) is quite simply to presuppose the very thing one wishes to negate and, therefore, is a fetish expression. The ‘sins’ of Marxism are legion and all point back, in one way or another, to idolatry and fetisism. The ‘greatest hits’ of fetish Marxology include:

- Conflating price and value;
- Separating value from exchange-value;
- Neglecting fictitious or fictional value;
- Splitting capital into different species, e.g., industrial and finance (capital fetishism);
- Regressing to a pre-sociological materialist paradigm (inherent or intrinsic value and ultra-realism where we find ideas such as commodities as “storing” value and conflating concrete production with ‘value creation’ via fetishistic retrogressions and retrojections);
- Failing to grasp the quality-quantity dialectic in the relationship between the labor process and valorization;
- Neglecting the decisive aspect of devaluation and derealization and, therefore, seeing value everywhere (spectacle);
- Myriad conceptual compressions, distorting shorthands, and so on.

Collins does a good job delineating distortions, condensations, compressions, and so on, within the Marxist concept of fetishism (1982: 95). Freud’s analyses of dreamwork and jokes are also highly relevant to a theory of fetishism and ideologies. Durkheim’s claim that the social world is essentially a kind of shared delusion and that collective consciousness often entertains itself at our expense, and that we need this delusion (virtual reality, in Žižek’s sense) to sustain life. Without a fantastic (fantasy) supplement, existence would be, according to Žižek, unbearable. Fantasy, he says, supports reality (passim). This might explain some of the more fantastic aspects of Marxism as a religion substitute and the inability to live without the commodity (capitalist anti-capitalism / anti-capitalist capitalism).

Marxology is rife with compressions such as “commodity production” and “labor theory of value” and so on, as if the whole club exists for the “temporarily embarrassed capitalist” (Steinbeck 2002: 27). It is not uncommon to find expressions such as “the material social content of the theory …” (Marcuse 1972: 145) or something about “material relations” (usually a mis-translation of ‘objective relations’) which literally contradicts itself since all relations are pure abstractions. Ideological compressions and fetish expressions are akin to the mechanisms that Freud discloses in his work on dream interpretation ([1900] 1965). And, importantly, in dreamwork the individual and the social, i.e., the profane and the sacred, “mutually absorb one another in the elucidation of the dream” (Forrester 1981: 48). Ironically, it is when the garden variety Marxists think that they are doing their darndest to be a good materialist that they slip right into dreamland.

A common view is that objects have an intrinsic worth which is reflected in the fact that sales take place for a price. Since all that is visible and tangible in an exchange transaction are the good and the price, it is natural to assume that the source of value lies in the good themselves [or the price, reflecting a different misinterpretation]. Marx argued, however, that value is only specified at that stage of the transaction, and that the origins of value lie in the labour-power which has contributed to the manufacture of the item. Thus the value of a commodity depends upon the [necessary] amount of labour expended in its creation. To believe that goods have an intrinsic
worth is to mistake mere appearance for reality…. Any contrary belief is the result of a fetishism of the commodity, allowing the superficial appearance of intrinsic worth to hide reality (Collins 1982: 95-96).

Dreams, as it turns out, like myth and ideology, represent breaks from reality and, perhaps, this is the reason the fascination with Marx, in the US at least, is limited to bored, middle-class dreamers who could not even threaten “a Sunday-school picnic” (Steinbeck 2002: 27).

Intellectuals are notoriously haunted by boredom…. Our intellectual maharajas are no exception, if only because they mainly talk to each other. There is no telling what outlandish religiosity, even one dripping with savage supernaturalism, may yet arise in these groups … (Berger 1969: 26).

It is hardly fortuitous that the historian and sociologist of capitalist rationality, Max Weber, recognized the spirit of capitalism in the lair of the Marxists. He visited a Party Congress of the German Social Democrats (SPD) in 1906 and concluded: ‘These gentlemen no longer frighten anyone’ (Jacoby 1981: 30).

The cultivation of “insurrectionary intention” on the part of the Left in core capitalist nations hardly registers (Miliband 1969: 179) and Marxism “fled the streets and factories for the halls and offices of the university” decades ago (Jacoby 1981: 1). A real, active revolution in the US today, with its hypertrophied security and police apparatuses, would be incomprehensibly oppressive, violent, and asymmetrical. “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another” (Mao Zedong 1927).

It's interesting to note that, at the beginning, we found Hegel referring to ‘some little totem’ in a way that makes more sense as a fetish (the enchantment of a singularity or sensuous individuality. Inversely, Marx’s whole theory of ‘fetishism’ makes more sense as a theory that exhibits totem-like aspects in that totemism is not the worship of a singular object, i.e., this carpet snake, but the whole carpet snake species, the snake per se — totemism is the worship of the whole class of things rather than this individual. Of course, we do not live in clan societies nor do we any longer worship ourselves in the form of plant or animal species, yet, when Fromm, for example, compared fascism to totemism he was simultaneously mistaken on the basis of misplacing the social organization of tribal societies and mapping it onto industrialized society. But he was also correct in seeing that the Nazis did not fetishize this or that singularity but whole classes or species of things as either pure or impure, sacred or demonic (Fromm 1978: 31-32). Both the fetish and the totem are forms of idolatry but they are not interchangeable and mean very different things from the standpoint of social logic. This argument, for thinking not in terms of commodity fetishism but commodity totemism is certainly unorthodox but we are not the first to propose such a theoretical spin. Bracken says of Marx:

When he says ‘fetishism,’ what Marx in fact means, by the standards of late nineteenth-century anthropology, is totemism. Frazer outlines the conventional distinction between a ‘fetich’ and a
‘totem’ in the opening paragraph of his 1887 monograph Totemism: ‘A totem is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation…. As distinguished from a *fetich*, a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects.’ Marx’s account of ‘fetish’ falls under Frazer’s definition of ‘totem.’ A *fetich,* according to Frazer, is an ‘isolated individual,’ whereas a totem is a genus. The commodity, according to Marx, is not an individual, such as a coat, a table, Karl’s labor power, or a loaf of bread; it is a generic ‘class’ of use values that act as the material bearers of exchange values (2014: 162).

Bracken was not, as it turns out, the first to deploy the phrase ‘commodity totemism’ but he is one of the few and we were unaware of the paucity of such a formulation until we searched for it during the writing of this piece. Our guess was that either nobody had figured it out or that it was a commonplace among the cultural studies and humanities types. As it turns out neither was the case. It is doubtful that such a shift will become persuasive among scholars but, nonetheless, we think that Bracken hits the nail on the head and our independent deduction serves as a kind of verification. Another way to augment this assertion is to see how Durkheim displaces the whole notion of the fetish with the *optional* totem (1995: 161, 166, 176). As it turns out, under the optional totem a singular entity (or a series of individuals) can be the object of temporary adoration. What we have, then, is a syllogism:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universal</th>
<th>Particular</th>
<th>Singular</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clan Totem</td>
<td>Personal Totem</td>
<td>Optional Totem</td>
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Durkheim makes a lot of sense here but we also think that there is still room for the fetish concept, not only in psychoanalytic theory, but within the sociological domain as well. For example, in some markets the cutting edge of production, distribution/exchange, and consumption (one of Marx’s syllogisms) lies in the one-off, bespoke commodity that goes beyond small batch production or categories such as ‘special’ or ‘limited’ editions. Rather, these are singular objects possessing names (usually female) rather than model designations or serial numbers (although, much of the uniqueness of each object is illusory and only skin deep, hiding, beneath the surface, a Fordist logic of interchangeability. These commodities function for the pervert consumer as a singular, contingent, temporary, material (lifeless) antenna that connects them to the ether, the specific portal to Nirvana that establishes a unique resonance between the ego and the big Other.

References


