

Fetishism: A Double Denial

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“The first step is to take fetishism seriously; not as a threat but as a promise.” [McCallum 1999: xi]

1. Why fetishism now?

We live among objects of all kinds. Indeed, surrounding materiality and our material corporeality are two self-evident bases of our lives. Even so, among the myriad studies of material culture and plethora of discussion about the body, few thinkers have studied both with a unifying purview. This article discusses the significance of notions of fetish and fetishism as part of a comprehensive framework for understanding our relationships both with material objects and the body. Concepts of fetishism have been mainly deployed in three ways: religious, economic, and psychoanalytic. So the first task is to re-examine these three kinds of fetishism, and present an alternative interpretation of fetishism. Here, I also emphasize how useful fetishism is as a tool (methodological fetishism) for criticizing modernist discourses.¹

2. Critique of “instrumentalism”

During the last two centuries, the features of the modern nation-state, based on democracy, secularization and separation of powers, and the market economy were formed in different ways in various parts of the world. Public debate in the most economically successful trading and manufacturing nation-states is informed by principles that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, and political and social life is now characterized by inherited, taken-for-granted social formations, practices, and ideologies that initially grew out of critical thought.

In their institutional organizations, modern states operate with an essentially European concept of personhood, centred on the ideal of an autonomous and rational individual (usu-

¹ This term is also used by Appadurai [1986: 5]. Refer also to Pels [1998: 93–95] and Hutchinson [2000: 56].

ally an adult white European male). Such a model has required the ‘other’, judged by comparison, to be inferior. This kind of ideology is sustained by, and spawns, dichotomies such as reason and emotion, rationality and irrationality, consciousness and unconsciousness, spirit and body, individual and society, human versus non-human entities including plants, animals, and material objects, fully human and less human, such as white and non-white, male and female, adult and minor, and West and East. This mode of locating the self and other had implications beyond the cognitive realm. Unable to see beyond the prejudices of Orientalism, especially in the 19th century, European males assumed the “white man’s burden” and set out to “civilize” through colonization.

One of the crucial differences between persons and material objects is the capacity for action. It is natural to assume that persons are active subjects, and that things around them are passive objects. After all, people manipulate objects. This kind of one-sided relationship is generally considered normal and natural.

When people control objects, they are involved in an ‘instrumental relationship’ that involves utilization of material things. As ‘rational’ or ‘superior’ beings, persons reserve the right to utilize other organisms and inanimate objects. Despite criticism, most famously stated in Kant’s Second Maxim, this kind of instrumental attitude has been, and continues to be, also applied to relations within human relations. Asymmetrical dichotomies—including male and female, the West (its people) and the East, adult and child, capital and labour—have supported ideologies that make it easier to exploit people in the kind of instrumental relationships that persons have with objects. The asymmetry of these dichotomies justifies the relationships in which the superior controls and utilizes, as a tool or resource, the inferior. Thus, the instrumentalization or subjectification of objects and other organisms in nature is extended to other human beings as well. And it goes even further. Our own bodies, the nature within ourselves, is also often considered in an instrumental way.²

Two issues haunt the instrumental outlook. One is the way it grasps persons, material objects, and the natural world (henceforth referred to as others, objects and nature) surrounding the individual as a single, overarching category. The imperative to accomplish tasks, or to meet targets, requires that everything be treated as a means to an end and, as such, things (now viewed as resources) are valued according how efficiently they help to achieve stipulated goals. Likewise, the relationship between the self and others/objects/nature is determined by notions of efficiency. This concern with efficiency simplifies what would otherwise be diverse and complex relationships and reduces them to a single dimension. People become bound by or obsessed with numbers: elapsed time, production quotas, numerical targets, and other quantifiable values.

² To simplify the argument, the discussion here mainly concerns the relationship between persons and objects, but the same can be said for the relationship between persons and their bodies.

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Secondly, the subject-object relationship is always one-sided. Others/objects/nature is a class of matter for manipulation and use by the self. In this way of thinking, the self is never utilized by anything, except situationally or structurally by other people. This way of thinking, however, does not very well match reality, in which the relationship with others/objects/nature is multiplex and characterized by reciprocal interaction. Persons are not involved in a one-way relationship with the world. We can easily conceive of reciprocal interactions between one person and another person or between persons and nature. But what about relationships between persons and objects? How do objects, such as a pebble on the side of the road or a pencil on a desk, interact with us? It is here that the concept of fetish proves its worth.

Objects are not perceived solely as tools or as resources: they also serve as symbols. An object may be endowed with meaning, in which case it functions as a sign or more generally as a text to be read. However ambiguous the meaning embodied by the object as text may be, the process of deciphering is always a one-sided subject-object relationship. A person deciphers an object's meaning, not vice versa. Even though we can read multiplex meanings from an object, the one-sided orientation remains the same as when objects are treated as instruments or resources.

Concentrating on the things needed to fulfil the basic needs of human life—food, clothing and housing—material culture has long been a subject of cultural anthropology. The conventional approaches of this specialized empirical field of study, however, do not shed further light on reality. When diffusionism was in vogue, by focussing on the physical differences between spatially distributed objects, it was possible to disregard the people who made the objects and the societies comprising relationships between people, in which they were formed. When analyzed as symbols, before long, even the objects themselves came to be of little interest to anthropologists.

At this juncture, the concept of fetishism may be able to take us beyond an impasse in understanding, allowing us to open up what appear to be unilateral and asymmetrical relationships between people and objects.³ In other words, the fetish concept undermines the assumption of dichotomous relations between living things and inanimate objects. Employed in this way, the fetish may have the power to rework our view of the unilateral subject-object relationship, one in which people have the upper hand. At the same time, the concept of fetishism encourages a mode of thought that does not stray from objects. Fetishism does not allow objects to be abstractly regarded merely as texts. It seems to me that the diverse and mutually interactive relationship between people and objects can be readily traced using the concept of fetishism.

³ See McCallum [1999: xi–xii].

3. What is fetishism?

As I mentioned earlier, the term fetishism has primarily been used in three fields⁴ in religious analysis (de Brosses); in economics (Marx); and in sexuality studies (Freud). As will be discussed below further, fetishism as a concept had its origins in a religious discourse about objects that were considered to have special power. Originally applied to “any of the objects used by the natives of the Guinea coast and the neighbouring regions as amulets or means of enchantment, or regarded by them with superstitious dread” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), what became the term fetish was often translated as “object with supernatural power” or “object of worship”.⁵ The concept of commodity fetishism was proposed by Marx in *Das Kapital* to criticize the reversed valuation of commodities and labour that held sway in capitalist societies. Referring to desire aroused by certain objects, such as lingerie or particular parts of the body, sexual fetishism was introduced to the literature by Binet (*Du fétichisme dans l’amour [Fetishism in Love]*, 1887), and elaborated by Krafft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 4th Ed., 1889) and Freud (*Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, 1905).

Common to all three types of fetishism is a displacement of fundamental values such as god, human labour, sexuality. They are rejected or concealed, and then seen as inhering in a completely different source, usually a specific object. In short, fetishism has been used to refer to a kind of misconception which involves a fetish as a surrogate. Religiously, a block of wood is worshipped instead of a god. In political economy, capitalists in pursuit of commodities and currency negate human labour, regard persons as means rather than ends, and thereby alienate people from their products. In sexuality, stimulation is excited by, for example, lingerie or the feet, which are misconceived as acceptable objects of desire.

One of the keys to understanding fetishism is this displacement. While naïve observers might be able to point out that the Emperor has no clothes, only outsiders with critical faculties can account for such misconceptions. Up to now, research into fetishism has been largely devoted to exposing the logic of displacement in fetishism from a critical, enlightened perspective. This article, however, concentrates on using the critical power of the concepts arising from fetishism, hitherto regarded as a phenomenon to be criticized. Here, we aim to criticize familiar modernist thought through fetishism.

To do this we need to examine the concepts of fetishism and fetish more closely. Pietz, the leading expert in fetishism research today, was chiefly responsible for rekindling interest in fetishism as a critical concept. According to him, the term “fetishism” arose during the late 15th century in the interaction between Portuguese merchants and people living in West Africa [Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988; Pietz & Apter (eds.) 1993]. The merchants referred to certain

⁴ See Gamman & Makinen [1994] for details.

⁵ See Ellen [1988] and Pool [1990] for the religious or ethnographic use of fetishism.

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objects venerated by the local people as '*fetiço*', a word meaning 'sorcery', the root of which is also present in the word 'artifice.'

Christian theologians, however, distinguished between idols and fetishes: whereas idols were objects with a malevolent spiritual being, fetishes were simply objects and nothing more.⁶ Fetish had the connotation of object being mixed up with spirituality, two elements that should be kept distinct from each other. Some observers referred to fetishes as "nonsensical" (and therefore ineffective) objects of worship. Pietz describes the situation as follows:

The first characteristic to be identified as essential to the notion of the fetish is that of the fetish object's irreducible materiality. The truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment; its truth is not that of the idol, for the idol's truth lies in its relation of iconic resemblance to some immaterial model or entity. This was one basis of the distinction between the *fetiço* and the *idolo* in medieval Portuguese [Pietz 1985: 7].

In Christian literature, the worship of man-made objects, along with idol worship, was not considered a true part of religion. Fetishes were not considered to be possessed, however, as idols were, by an evil presence of, for example, Satan.

Pietz is interested in the idea that fetishes were regarded as simple objects, and suggested that the idea was derived from the interaction between different cultures in the circumstances of trade. At an early stage, the concept of fetishism already revealed an asymmetrical relationship between the West and non-West (West Africa), or between Christian and non-Christian. Fetishism was held to be a feature of religions other than Christianity and to be present in the religious practices of non-Christians, which were considered erroneous from the Christian perspective. When fetishes were discussed, they were a focus for criticizing the erroneous values of people without a real, that is, Christian, God. Since no attempt was made to understand fetishes in context and because those who revered them were judged inferior, the stance was clearly discriminatory. By conceptualizing fetishes and fetishism, we are able, however, to question subject-object and self-other relationships. Furthermore, despite the lingering legacy of Eurocentricity, it is important to differentiate fetishism from animism, manaism, shamanism, totemism, and various other concepts related to religious origins that gained currency after fetishism. Fetishism is not merely one among the many religious practices that were discovered in the non-Christian world. The word carried a value-judgement, and religious practices that involved fetishes were held to be based on erroneous perception.

The problem of the nonuniversality and constructedness of social value emerged in an intense

⁶ Criticism of Pietz's Eurocentricism have been made by Graeber [2005]. See Pietz [1987] for details of the relationship between idols and fetishes.

form from the beginning of the European voyages to black Africa. Thus, one of the European voyagers to West Africa, the Venetian Alvise da Cadamosto, who sailed to Senegal under Portuguese charter in the late 1450's, was moved to write of the blacks of Gambia, "Gold is much prized among them, in my opinion, more than by us, for they regard it as very precious; nevertheless they traded it cheaply, taking in exchange articles of little value in our eyes..."[Pietz 1985: 9].

So, even though the idea of fetishism was generated by Eurocentricism, it still carries a relativistic or constructivistic potential in that allows that the value of objects differs between cultures. For the Portuguese merchants, men with sure faith in Christianity, who first encountered fetishes, the practice of designating value to what they considered worthless items was simply put down to to benightedness or ignorance. Once noticed, the power invested in often innocuous objects, labelled now as fetishes, would later be found to be more universal than the first observers could have imagined.⁷ This was brilliantly demonstrated by Marx's characterization of the fetishism of commodities.

Exotic fetish objects became popular collector's items in Holland when it overtook Portugal and Spain as a maritime power. Eventually the term was incorporated into French. With the publication of de Brosses' *Du Culte des dieux fetiches* (1760), fetishism, defined as the religious practice of worshipping fetishes, became an official academic term.

For de Brosses, fetishism was the religious practice of ascribing spiritual significance to and worshipping things that were not of the one true God. He went on to imply that it was an irrational practice befitting African people, whom he believed, as a rational European, to be less highly evolved. It is noteworthy, however, that in de Brosses' conception, plants and animals could also be fetishes. He also pointed out the existence of fetishism in ancient Egypt [1988].

Fetishism was later used by Hegel and Comte in paradigms of cultural evolution, and was proposed by Tyler and others as the origin of religion.⁸ Used by Marx, Binet, and Freud, the word became generally familiar through its use in economics, psychology, and psychoanalysis.

4. The denial of non-existence

In *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof*, the fourth section of Chapter

⁷ For example, Binet [1887] recognizes fetishism within Christianity.

⁸ Despite rising awareness of the concept among the general public, the significance of fetishism in religious theology was lost by the mid-19th century. A fascinating discussion illustrating this point by Matsuzawa [2000] was brought to my attention by Jun'ichi Isomae of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

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One, Commodities, in *Das Kapital Vol. 1*, Marx states the following:⁹

Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself. The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour-power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally, the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things *qua* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world, productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities [Marx 1965: 71–72].

The “products of labour”, because they are created by human labour, if they were objects of human control, would be valued by the amount of labour put into them. Once they are produced as commodities in a capitalist world, however, they “appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race”. Commodity fetishism is a manifestation of the alienation of the work of the labourer

⁹ See Guadiola-Riviera [2007] for Marx's use of fetishism in contexts other than commodity fetishism, and to Ishizuka & Yasui [1998] for discussion concerning Marx's commodity fetishism and his understanding of de Brosses.

in capitalist society, and it only comes into complete existence, “the ultimate of materiality” [Yasui 1998: 155], with the development of currency, especially in the form of banknotes, which enables unit values to be given to each commodity.¹⁰

Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism encompassed commodities in general, but as observed by Benjamin [2002], commodities themselves are further “fetishized” as consumer society matures. In due course, commodities are propagated to feed consumer greed and a hunger for the status and potency that is conferred by products.¹¹

While Marx applied de Brosses’ concept of fetishism to capitalist society, Freud derived his concept from a slightly different background, as will be discussed later. One of Freud’s early discussions of fetishism is found in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*. Published in 1889, it draws on psychological research done by Binet and Krafft-Ebing. In this work, Freud introduces cases of fetishism as “those in which the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim” [1962: 19], and differentiates “normal” and “pathological” fetishism. Normal fetishism could, for example, be an exclusive sexual desire for people with a particular hair colour, or an interest in the underwear that belongs to an individual that one loves. This is merely a variation of “normal love”, and does not preclude penetrative sexual intercourse. “Complete fetishism” denotes fetishism as a phenomenon likened to a pathological condition, where the object “becomes detached from a particular individual, and becomes the *sole* sexual object,” [Freud 1962: 20]. In contrast to fetishism as a part of normal love, in pathological fetishism, sexual congress is avoided.

Later, in 1927, Freud published *Fetischismus (Fetishism)* [Freud 1950] in which fetishism was explained by relating it to a castration complex evoked by the sight of maternal genitalia.

According to Freud, the absence of the penis (phallus) may shock an infant boy when

¹⁰ Yasui [1998: 155] explains money fetishism: “When banknotes were proposed as a representation of currency as promissory notes, although valueless in and of themselves, they were promised the power of exchange proportionate to their convertibility with currency. Here we see the progress of materiality, where a simple piece of paper, in other words, an object, becomes value itself, and consequently possesses the power to control society. Fiat money, however, is the ultimate of materiality in that a piece of paper is guaranteed convertibility by the entire system, with no background proof of its value as embodiment of labour, and dominates as a fetish. Fundamentally, the basis of value in both commodities and currency are in their embodiment of labour. However, by replacing this relationship with one mediated through objects, objects are treated as if they have inherent value, and people become caught in the activity trap of aiming to accumulate wealth and money or having complete control over capital, thus furthering the fetishization of commodities, money, and capital.” See also Godelier [1970].

¹¹ See Gamman & Makinen [1994: 28–36] and Baudrillard [1981] for the treatment of commodities in late capitalism.

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he sees his mother's genitalia. The boy may then "disavow" or deny (*Verleugnung*) this fact (that his mother lacks a phallus). A substitute for the phallus does not, however, appear in the mother's genitalia; detached from the genitalia, a representation of the mother's phallus arises elsewhere, as a fetish, for example, in specific body parts or articles of clothing. In this way, the child overcomes his fear of castration, because his mother now has a phallus. This fetish as a missing phallus is "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it" [Freud 1950: 200]. The disavowal of the absence of a phallus, on one hand, creates an aversion towards female genitalia and, on the other, leads to a sexual desire for the fetish. According to Freud, this disavowal is not complete, and generally involves an internal and ambiguous conflict between acceptance and denial.

As mentioned earlier, a fetish is a substitute for something else. In Freud's account, this something is generalized as female genitalia, the female body, or the mother. Thinking again, however, we find that Freud says that a substitute is found for something that did not exist in the first place. The substitution is motivated by the absence of a phallus.¹² Traumatized after discovering that his mother does not have a phallus, the child subsequently disavows this fact. There is a denial that the mother was castrated and lacks a phallus, and through a psychological process in the child's mind, he comes to a conviction that the mother must somewhere have a phallus. In this endowment, the fetish both acts as a substitute for something that does not exist, and simultaneously serves to conceal its absence. Furthermore, the fetish also serves to lament the missing object [Mulvey 1996: 5].

Freud's account of fetishism suggests that a fetish is not merely a misconception of value nor a substitute for what is true or valued. Even so, in religious contexts, a piece of wood has been held to be a fetish because it is 'mistaken' for a deity. And in economic analysis, commodities are considered fetishes because they are mistaken to have inherent value when, in fact, their true value is their embodied human labour. This idea of misconception was established before Freud's analysis and the notion of mistakenness remains in his account. For example, when a high-heeled shoe becomes a fetish, it takes the place of the mother's phallus. But even before this, there is a more fundamental erroneous assumption that the mother should have a phallus.

Extending this analysis, we can wonder whether religious fetishes are created in denial of the fact that a deity or deities do not exist. This strand of thought may help us go beyond the Orientalist account of religious fetishism, where worshipping fetishes is associated with the ignorance of people who have yet to receive the blessing of the one true faith. This attitude both affirms the superiority of Western culture and makes a virtue of mission-

¹² For revisions of the Freudian theory of female fetishism, see Krips [1999: 8-9], which draws on theories by Lacan. For theories regarding fetishism among women, see Gamman & Makinen [1994: 28-36] and Baudrillard [1981].

ary zeal. The idea that fetishes might be born out of denial of a fact, that is the absence of god, would enable an analytical framework that could encompass phenomena ranging from tiny pieces of wood worshipped by people in Africa to grand marble statues in the Vatican. To a disinterested observer, the absolute distinction between idol and fetish is of interest only in terms of what motivated the division, into fundamentally different classes, of phenomena that are categorically similar.

Then, in economics, it is generally understood that commodities embody two types of value, use value and exchange value. If we were to assume, however, just as with deities or the maternal phallus, that exchange value is initially non-existent, we might then consider whether making a fetish of commodities is a way of denying the original absence of exchange value. This kind of discussion of commodities is even more fruitful when the idea of money is also worked into the argument.

The contention is that a fetish is not merely a phenomenon arising from a naïve misapprehension of the facts. Rather it results from a two-fold displacement that endows a substitute object with some kind of extra presence in the process of denying a specific fact—in each instance an absence: the maternal phallus, deities, or exchange value. The substitute then becomes an object that has the power to enthrall and, at the same time, distract attention from the original absence. In this way, fetishism involves two counterfactual acts: a denial of a disturbingly true state of affairs, and the factitious endowment of some other thing with a ‘truth’ that was originally absent.¹³

In fetishism of whatever kind, if a fetish is regarded as a substitute for an absence, does it not follow that a fetish may be substituted for any absent phenomenon? Logically this may be true, but the creative energy required to conjure a fetish seems driven by non-trivial impulses. Fetishes seem to arise in special circumstances and, outside of sexual fetishism, validity seems subject to the jury of social opinion or convention. The objects of substitution, however, can be more diverse. Anything can become an object of religious worship, or a commodity, or an object of sexual desire. In other words, rather than being a *signifié* (something signified), the fetish is a *significant flottant*, a “floating signifier.”

It should also be noted here that the logic of fetish creation is by no means simple: the knowledge of the fact (the mother does not have a phallus) and its disavowal (the mother actually has a phallus) is extremely ambivalent [Freud 1950]. Moreover, once a fetish is created, it has an enduring presence in the minds of those who respond to it. A sexual fetish palpably stimulates, money is used every day for exchange, and people manifest ritual behaviour toward deities. When a critical observer denies these entities as phantasms pro-

¹³ Looking at the relationship of the three types of fetishism, some research [Krips 1999: 8–9] has been done in an attempt to relate sexual fetishism (private) to religious fetishism (public). Others have tried to come to a comprehensive understanding of fetishism [Imamura 1992; Ellen 1988].

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duced by false consciousness, the denial threatens the basic tokens of identity. This kind of truth undermines our lived experience of the world. Devotion to the fetish seems to be a price we are willing to pay for relief from the uneasiness of absence.

In his 1919 work *Das Unheimliche* [*The Uncanny*], Freud states that the uncanny occurs with the emergence of something that should have remained repressed [Freud 1955: 240], and that “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition, and the castration complex comprise practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny.” [Freud 1955: 242]. Freud’s extended discussion of fetishism was not published until later, yet, it may be assumed that fetishes are also “uncanny” and trigger anxiety.¹⁴

5. Fetish networking

Any idea of fetishism as a relationship between people, material objects, and the body is based on a twofold misconception—first that something should be present when it is absent, and then that an arbitrary object can represent the presence with some special power. Moreover, it also assumes that a patently correct representation of the true facts is possible. Needless to say, this kind of assumption is exactly what underlies the modernist way of thinking discussed in the beginning of this article.

Since the 18th century, seeking to reveal what is considered the true nature of things, enlightened thought has paid great attention to criticising superstition and mindless custom. Such thought would have no problem debunking such a double misconception or denial. A venerated piece of wood is not a god. Money is only a piece of paper. The high-heeled shoe that arouses sexual interest is merely a shoe... Such assertions serve only to reinforce the worldview of modernism. They provide no means of creating new relationships by people with others, material objects, and nature.¹⁵ To go beyond this, we must accept that the idea of a completely objective investigator is a modernist myth.

As we grapple with understanding the motivation and mechanisms of fetishism, especially if we consider that it results from a two-fold misconception, we will be susceptible to our own brand of false consciousness if we assume our analysis is undertaken from a privileged position, or that we are ourselves immune from such misconceptions. The more we assert our objectivity, the greater the temptation to consider fetishists as deluded and, as such, inferior to our enlightened selves.

¹⁴ In *Fetishism*, Freud (1950: 201) uses the term “uncanny trauma”, which was brought to my attention by my colleague Kosuke Tsuiki.

¹⁵ The enlightened rationale typically develops towards unification [Ellen 1988] and deconstruction (the argument that fetishism is meaningless [Pool 1990]), two seemingly opposite goals.

Our earliest accounts of religious fetishism, by Portuguese merchants who operated with commercial rationality within a larger Christian framework, saw fetishism as something done by African people, not by true believers. Compared with to procreative sexuality, sexual fetishism is apt to seem misguided or perverse. When commodity fetishism is considered, it is easy to regard as fetishists those unenlightened consumers who remain ignorant of the true nature of the capitalist economy. In each instance, the fetishist, in thrall to misconceptions, is cast as ‘the other’ in opposition to ‘the modernist self,’ who has some kind of hotline to, or even ownership of, the truth: the fetishist is in error, an inferior ‘other’. Any new investigative project exploring fetishism must question both the one-way instrumental relationship of people with others, material objects, and nature, and the asymmetrical relationship between the self and other (the inquiring self and the fetishist) that is revealed by fetishism. For this to happen, it is necessary to begin the discussion from the viewpoint of the fetishist, who has been regarded as inferior in the modernist outlook. As McCallum [1999: xvi] rightfully points out, rather than seeking to define fetishism, it is more important to use fetishism as a way of thinking, as well as a way of living.

The question then arises: How would fetishism dictate our way of living? First of all, we must realize and acknowledge that, much like the fetishists, we are also prone to misconception. If misapprehension is a distinguishing characteristic of fetishism, we have to admit that we are prone to fetishistic acts of creating concepts that distract attention away from absences. As Imamura [1992] claims, misconception is a universal mental mechanism. To go beyond the poor explanatory power of the instrumental and symbolic outlooks, to develop a relationship of interactive standing with others, objects, and nature, it is crucial that we properly respect misinterpretation, understanding the role it plays in creating interactive networks with others/objects/nature. After all, fetishes create intimate relationships and affect an individual’s desires, practices, health, and personal identity. Furthermore, as well as affecting one’s personhood, a fetish can create an inseparable relationship with the body:

One way in which the medieval Portuguese *feitiço* was distinguished from *idolo* was that, whereas the idol was conceived as a freestanding statue, the fetish was typically some fabricated object worn about the body. Moreover, the idea of the idol emphasized worship of a false god or demonic spirit, whereas *feitiços* were practiced to achieve certain tangible effects (such as healing) upon or in service of the user. The fourth theme found in the idea of the fetish is, then, that of the subjection of the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments [Pietz 1985: 10].

In other words, the body responds to the effects of a fetish (e.g., an amulet). Here, I envision a fetish network in which the body and objects are connected in a mutually affecting

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manner in relationships of concordance. In this network, while rather closely controlling or governing their own bodies, surrounding objects, and other people, persons exert greater or lesser influence on the things that come to their attention. Meanwhile, they are also influenced by these things, and by other things that they may not be aware of. The link between the fetishist and the fetish is influenced by feelings of power and pleasure as well as the desire for these things. The fetishist is simultaneously the subject and the object of a desire and the solicitor of desire. Desiring or wanting to keep company with the fetish, the fetishist wants what inheres in this object of desire. We desire the fetish and we desire the fetish to desire us. Our lives are intertwined in a complex network of desire that has fetishes as its core.

This network of desire includes various types of fetish, including one's own body parts, that are objects of desire. In our capability to misconceive and desire others to desire, we are all fetishists. This fact allows us to critically examine the modernist quest for truth even as we create a world that allows relationships of concordance with objects, the body, others, and nature. For anthropology and sociology, concepts of fetishism, a new model of agents (as fetishists) may open an additional dimension and thus enable a better understanding of the nature of the networks involving fetishes (which is not limited to people). Although this network conception is not completely immune to the criticisms of anthropocentrism, because it can accommodate ambivalent emotions in the relationship between people and things, it may be robust enough to resolve some issues. The ambivalent emotions aroused by fetishes cannot be reduced to an "affordance" theory.

McCallum [1999], another thinker dissatisfied with prevailing dualistic paradigms of thought, suggested that Freud's theory of fetishism is not based on rigid ideas of gender and sexuality. In fact, Freud's account insinuates the vulnerability of such ideas. She goes on to argue that fetishism is a way of life that ensures the possibility of a more liberal identity formation and greater diversity of interpretation. For example, to deny that the mother's absence of a phallus while simultaneously acknowledging its absence by creating a fetish is effectively an acknowledgment of gender and sexual differences. McCallum claims that the conflict involved in the denial of the truth leads to creativity. Furthermore, she speculates that sexual fetishists realize that they are incomplete, and that friendship based on care arises from this realization.

While I am still unwilling to uncritically advocate fetishism,¹⁶ I do find McCallum's idea that fetishism is meaningful both for analysis—to better understand the world—and also as a way to better live is certainly worth thinking about.

¹⁶ For example, McCallum [1999: 167–168] by no means ignores these problems.

6. Conclusion

Fetishism is a difficult issue. The original notion arose in the context of the encounter with “the other”, unenlightened by the grace of god and so inferior. As such, it is a concept that may be used to open up modernist discourses that are ultimately based on enlightened rationality. Practically, in religious studies, theology, anthropology, material culture studies, and other academic fields that are susceptible to enlightened rationality, any fetishism research naturally requires criticism. Meanwhile, we live in a world surrounded by eroticized commodities [Benjamin 2002]: inevitably, we become fetishists whether we choose to or not. This world, however, should not be justified by our proposal of “fetishist thinking” as opposed to modernist thinking. Rather, as analysts seeking knowledge that helps us and others to better locate ourselves in the world and lead better lives, we need to sustain a critical attitude that helps us seek to discover what is and compare it to an idea of what could be. Fetishism implies a way of life, and comes with a set of concepts that enable fresh interpretations of people and their relationships with others, objects, and nature. At the same time, as a phenomenon, it seems to be an obstruction, a thing to be criticized.

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