

Money, Commodities, Fetishism Definitions

Commodity--

Dictionary definitions:

1. something that is useful or can be turned to commercial or other advantage
2. an article of trade or commerce, esp. an agricultural or mining product, that can be transported

Marx (condensed from Keenan in Apter and Pietz *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*):

1. a thing
2. a thing (imaginary or not) for the use/consumption of humans
3. double-thing--a thing with use-value *and* exchange-value

[Note: this presumes that the commodity is made for exchange, made not just to be used, but to be exchanged. This is crucial: As Marx views it, the commodity is actually *made* to be exchanged rather than just used. This seems to presume a full-blown commodity exchange culture, whether tied to capitalism or not. It also seems to presume that some objects are made to be used only, not exchanged, and some are made to be exchanged from the get-go.]

Godelier:

1. (p.20) Commodities seem to possess a value in themselves, independent of the labor expended in their production.
2. (p.63) commodities in capitalism: The usefulness of a commodity is important only insofar as it is the indispensable support for its exchange-value and thereby the means, the instrument of enhancing capital.

3. (p. 166) objects which are detachable from persons or groups which circulate in impersonal relations between persons or groups.

[Note: In Godelier's last definition, it seems to be presumed that commodities are taken outside the context of personal social relationships]

Money--

Dictionary definitions:

1. a commodity, such as gold or silver, that is legally established as an exchangeable equivalent of all other commodities and is used as a measure of their comparative values on the market.
2. The official currency, coins, and negotiable paper notes issued by a government.

Mauss: (Three Kinds/Stages of Money)

1. money as object of exchange--first economic stage
2. money as object of exchange and as counter, as having a fixed enough value to allow it to be used to calculate value of other objects--second stage
3. money that is alienated, separated from the sacred, separated from social relations--third stage (capitalism)

Godelier:

1. (p. 165) Monies are precious objects.
2. Monies are precious objects which were both alienable and inalienable but which have become 'definitively' alienable (that is, detached from non-commercial relations).
3. Money in capitalism (p.63) the mainstream of capitalism is the desire to make money with money--money is transformed into capital which is then invested in the production and circulation of

commodities. [Remember that general-purpose money is a special kind of commodity]

Fetish and Fetishism

Dictionary definitions (of fetish):

1. an object that is superstitiously believed to have magical powers, especially of protection.
2. an object of unreasonably excessive attention or reverence [here we get the Marxist and Freudian ideas, but they developed those ideas based on the ideas contained in the first definition]
3. something, such as a material object or an often nonsexual part of the body, that arouses or gratifies sexual desire [we might question the idea that there *is* a nonsexual part of the body--sexuality is interpretative and cultural; this definition takes us straight to Freud of course]

Marx (Capital, p. 165):

The commodity-form...is nothing but the determined social relation between humans themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take a flight into the misty realm of religion. Here the products of the human head appear as endowed with a life of their own, entering into relations both with each other and with humans. This I call fetishism.

William Pietz:

1. (p.129) Marx understood 'capital' to be a species of fetish. A factory machine, a wheat field...are fetishes in Marx's view...in their reality as material forms of a distinctive type of social system.
2. (p.130) Fetishism is the term Marx used to characterize the capitalist social process as a whole.

3. (p.140) The 'religion of sensuous desire' is thus the perverse submission of intellect and moral will to a sort of libidinal aesthetics; it is, by definition, the crudest form of spirituality because the sensuous object can never--as a thing in itself--untransubstantiated into the signifier or allegory of a concept or ideal--attain to any categorical universality, the only proper object of devotion or allegiance.

[This is the part which links Marxist and Freudian fetishism]

4. (p.3) The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event: it is above all a 'historical' object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event.

Emily Apter:

Apter speaks of fetishism as the 'other phallus' standing in for a supposed 'real' phallus no longer there.

Henry Krips:

Krips suggests that (p. 29) fetishism is not a matter of a socially unacceptable or unusual desire but rather a paradoxical refusal to follow up on one's desire. This relates to the fetish not being simply the substitute for the object desired but an obsession with an object that actually gets in the way of acquiring the desired object. The end result is the same: The fetish is the substitute for an object one cannot possibly have. The emphasis is different though, because for Krips, in obsessing with the substitute, one is refusing even to pursue the original object desired.

It is important to note that Krips is following Lacan rather than Freud. Either way, fetishism revolves around the notion of 'lack'. For Freud, the lack originates when the child notices that the mother lacks a penis, and is afraid that he will lose his penis or that she will not get a penis from the mother. For Lacan, it is the phallus rather than the penis, where the phallus is only associated with the penis in our western, patriarchal society. The organizing point is that the child experiences a psychic transformation, moving from needing the mother or caregiver to realizing a dependence upon the caregiver, and thus a lack in him/herself, a void which the

caregiver, who comes and goes and is after all, separate from the individual, cannot fill. So, Krips diagrams the sequence like this:

Mother's lack=Subject's original lack, then:

Mother's lack=Subject's original lack=continuing lack of satisfaction=lack of substitution object (of which fetish is one type), then:

Mother's lack=Lack of substitution object (of which fetish is one type)

Freudian and Marxist fetishism:

1. What does this Freudian fetishism have to do with Marxist fetishism?

The relationship I see is with *desire*. In capitalism, as in phallus-envy, one is desiring something one never had to begin with, one is desiring lack or loss, one is desiring desire itself, rather than the ordinary object of desire (complete and total access to the caregiver, or Mother's body). [The subject is desiring union--since the lack develops from the recognition of dependence upon others, the recognition of need] We might say then, that it is as if, or because, one desires desire, that money continues to beget money, capital goes on and on, there is never enough.

2. Capitalism harnesses this desire, even exacerbates it, but does not create it.

Marxist fetishism therefore:

1) relates to psychological principles of Freudian/Lacanian fetishism

2) is based on the first two dictionary definitions of fetishism (magical, and excessive reverence), though these are not complete:

a. Marx's fetishism refers to commodity fetishism in the sense of an excessive reverence for commodities (of which money is a special type), but

b. Marx's fetishism also refers to commodities as fetishes because they conceal and substitute for 'what is really going on'

c. Paradoxically, commodity fetishism refers to treating commodities as fetishes, not to fetishism in the sense of a system, an *organizing principle*.

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d. There is *only one* Marxian fetishism in the sense of organizing principle (and commodities *as fetishes* are just one piece of that whole): It refers (as in quote from Marx above) to the whole process of substituting objects (e.g., money, capital) for human productivity.