

# Two Accounts of 'Fetish' in Marx and Freud

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*Can one not find among one's own circle of acquaintances people who will ascribe the little mishaps and accidents of the day to their having got out on the wrong side of the bed? The spilling of salt, the sailor's objection to sailing on Friday, and many other analogues, may be found in the superstition of our own people...(But) for fetishism proper, in the sense in which it is now commonly accepted, one must look to Africa, and particularly to the West Coast.*

– Charles Dickens<sup>1</sup>

Both Marx and Freud used the word 'fetish' in ways that have enjoyed unmatched impact on subsequent social theory's conception of objects. This apparently overlapping term of art was key to attempts at merging these intellectual traditions into a twin-headed 'Freudo-Marxism'. These accounts twin objects as produced by capitalist political economy and as sexual targets, respectively. But in light of recent studies of Marx, it's no longer clear that this merger is fruitful, or even sustainable. To put it bluntly, Marx's approach to fetish helpfully avoids the bend towards pathologisation

*Desire is not an ahistorical urge, and it in itself won't – can't – save us...Capital begins with the fetish, it goes on to say a lot of other things, and at the end of 900-odd pages, the fetish is untrammelled by analysis. What was true at the beginning is true at the end. There is no way to take apart the fetish with logic.*

– Jordy Rosenberg

found in Freud, with ease. This is because Marx doesn't concern himself with the psyche, or care for distinctions between conscious and unconscious. Instead, his use of 'fetish' features a subversive bite, lost in much of today's reception.

Rather than providing a guide to either the psychological or spiritual impact of commodities onto proletarian lives, Marx's *Capital* instead uses the term to provide a witty appropriation of earlier bourgeois anthropology. As the quote from Dickens exemplifies, the conventions of 19th century anthropological writing were openly racist in their

reasoning. They urged readers (presumed European men) to 'look to Africa' to understand the primitive origins of fetish-worship. Marx aimed to provide a different view of fetish: rather than belonging to another continent, and distant practices found there, everyday commodities straddled the mundane account-keeping of shopkeeping, and 'theological' truths that closer examination would quickly reveal.

Rather than absorb this challenge to European chauvinism, today's social theory is prone to adopting a Freudian approach to the question of 'fetish'. In this view fetishes *are* to be found throughout the western world, but only in the form of pathological psychic or cultural developments. (In this way, Freud's writings stick more closely to the original externalising approach taken by anthropologists contemporary to him – who were mostly still unperturbed by Marx's satire.) This common understanding threatens to rob Marx's usage of any subversiveness found in *Capital*.

Grasping what Marx meant when he referred to the commodity's 'fetish character' requires some detachment from our own commonplace uses of the term. Distinguishing between Marx and Freud's approaches (fetish-character versus fetish as pathology) is necessary both to retain this stylistic distinction, and to capture their respective satire versus rearticulation. This account of commodities as fundamentally mysterious (whoever observes them) contrasts against Freud's more minoritising understanding of fetish as a developmental quirk. The *formal* mode of thought taken by Marx has implications for sex that have not yet been addressed. An overly hasty merger with the *clinical* investigations of Freud has instead resulted in a lasting confusion around the true concern of *Capital's* opening sections on commodities: the sensual and super-sensual.

For Marx, commodities do not exert a mysterious hold over our lives due to a pathological breakdown, and they are not the corrupting articles of 'consumerist' cultural decay. Their power is not simply ideological, or a quirk of spiritual eccentricity, but instead founded in how commodities have a distinctive *twofold* face. They are at once sensual items that can be interacted with

immediately, and by-products of grand social forces that can only be apprehended 'super-sensually'. It's this illuminating distinction between sensual and super-sensual that Freudian accounts of fetish (instead focused on relation of conscious to unconscious) have come to eclipse.

This situation between the sensual and super-sensual is shared by sex acts and desires, which is exactly why analysts of these features of human life have been so quick to turn to overarching terms (patriarchy, hetero-normativity) to account for their form. The best of psychoanalytic theory has firmly resisted reducing humanity to an asymmetrical division of the sexually well-ordered and depraved fetishists. As Jacqueline Rose has put it, the tradition offers solace of a universalist flavour:

*"It's axiomatic for psychoanalysis that no one is demeaned by the unconscious...The things you're ashamed of, don't be ashamed: because we're all in this, together."* (Rose, 2013)

But these accounts often move overly hastily, losing along the way both the sensual content that provides an equally mysterious (or queer) enmeshment to commodities, and also the profoundly *particular* focus Freud's developmental account of fetish provides.

Until this distinction in purpose between 'fetish character' and 'fetishism' is understood, any merger of Marxist and Freudian theory threatens to be a lopsided one – with Marx's distinction between sensual and super-sensual registers fully submerged into Freud's psychologising account of fetishism as the wake of a personal journey into civilised life.

Uniquely, the original sense of 'fetish' found in Marx's *Capital* provides us with an insight into the *sensuousness* of human activity. While the distinction between sensual and super-sensual (which the commodity was taken to straddle) was crucial for Marx, this point remains somewhat undigested by current social theory. The pathological sense of 'fetishism' has become a grand detour into the psyche, a decades long journey away from grasping the commodity as a *form*.

If sex can be grasped meaningfully, we'll need the best possible account of the sensuousness that fills human life. This essay provides an attempt at translation towards that end, to be used playfully. Let's return the word 'fetish' to a true double entendre.

## I. Commodities 'at first sight' vs. closer inspection

The term 'fetish' appeared late in Marx's career. Michel Heinrich notes that the term 'fetish character' is missing even from *Capital's* forerunning exposition *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Heinrich 2016, 104). In other words, it is with 'fetish' that *Capital* seeks to finally redress the lack of regard for 'sensuousness', that Marx had years before characterised as hindering previous attempts at philosophical materialism (Marx 1845). In *Capital*, Marx begins with this meeting place of the sensual and super-sensual (as Rosenberg's opening quote observes):

*A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.*<sup>2</sup> (Marx 1990, 61)

Laura Mulvey has argued, that the 'alchemic link' between Marxist and Freudian thought which appears around fetish, at first glance can be deceptive given their marked divergences (Mulvey 1996, 2). Here I will instead offer caution, that confusion between Freud and a *non-psychological* conception of commodities is best avoided. To put it more provocatively: *Capital* does not advance any view of the unconscious, and that's for the better.

Rather than guiding us towards an austere or stripped back 'materialism' to serve as the counterpart of explorations of sexuality as 'superstructural' dalliance, *Capital's* account of commodities' fetish character instead playfully highlights the difficulty observers have in making sense of them.

After sections exploring both the two forms of value present in commodities, and 'The Two

Forms of Labour Embodied in Commodities', Marx closes chapter one of *Capital* with a section promising to introduce the commodity's 'secret':<sup>3</sup>

*"...This fetish character of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them."*

*"It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility".* (Marx, 1990, 63)

While derisory towards the many political economists it works through, *Capital* clearly absorbs classical political economy's perspective of situating apparently personal choices within grander reproductive chains of social process, as recently noted by Kyle Baasch:

*"...From Adam Smith to Marx, is concerned with the way in which individuals contribute, through seemingly self-interested economic decisions, to the reproduction of a social process that takes place behind their backs and beyond their comprehension, and the way in which this same social process consequently directs or diminishes the individual capacity to act".* (Baasch, 2021)

This sense of unwitting ramifications of actions serves much of the role played by the unconscious in the later developed tradition of psychoanalysis. Rather than a narrative of personal development, this 'reproduction of social process' is what Marx argues class actors find themselves locked into. While bearing a family resemblance to accounts which focus on Freud's 'unconscious' (in that they explore the limits of intentionality as governing human action), Marx's concern was form, rather than psyche.

Actions taken 'behind the backs' of economic actors are related to the demands of overarching processes (which are typically not easily grasped fully for anyone immersed in participation with them). The result is that even a sybaritic,

headlong pursuit of the sensual does not leave anyone beyond the reach of their supersensual context. Leisure, rest and enjoyment are each embedded in the needs of Capital for a productive (and reproductive) workforce.

Marx did not explore how the imperatives he sought to identify played out for any *personal* participant, instead bringing into view the overarching *logic* that had arisen around commodity production historically. Using a metaphor drawn from the natural sciences, Marx would refer frequently to his approach as identifying the respective 'laws of motion' of each historical epoch. In *Capital*, he focused more specifically on the naturalisation of capital's logic.

The commodity's fetish-character appears not with reference to Marx's interactions with specific commodities, but one aspect of that logical picture. As Beverly Best has it:

*Unlike the diversity and expansiveness of the social formation, Capital's object of analysis is exceedingly narrow: an immaterial but objective, historically emerging social compulsion that comes to function in capitalist society like a force of gravity...But which allows for a range of expression, thereby creating the appearance that no such gravitational force operates at all. (Best, 2021)*

In short, identifying the fetish-character of commodities granted a sense of the historically contrived ways they came to appear as natural kinds. Marx used 'fetish' to highlight the conjuncture of the everyday and devotional, which each of us is obliged to live along.

## II. 'A particular and quite special penis'

Today, the successful dissemination of Freudian psychoanalysis into popular thought is such that any talk of 'fetishism' threatens to bring to mind pathological eroticism, first and foremost.

For his part, Freud first introduced 'fetishism' to address the question of castration anxiety,

a developing focus of his thinking since the start of the previous decade.<sup>4</sup> Despite this longstanding fixation, Freud introduced fetishes as castration hesitantly, and with little exuberance:

*When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost...It should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and - for reasons familiar to us - does not want to give up. (Freud 1927, 152)*

As this origin suggests, fetishism in this account was introduced as a particular experience and effectively serves as the glove to the hand of trauma. The repetitive yearnings of the fetishist are shaped around the continual returns of traumatic experience. As Mulvey has it: 'The fetish acknowledges its own traumatic history like a red flag, symptomatically signalling a site of psychic pain.' (Mulvey 1996, 12).

Freud's use of terms corresponded to his clinical practice, with either particular figures (such as Little Hans or Dora) or clusters of experiences (as with sadomasochists in 'A Child Is Being Beaten'). As such, Freud's 'fetishism' was always intended as a means of honing a personal judgment and refining an etiological accounting of irregular compulsions. The 'special penis', that usually would have been divulged, instead found itself sustained through the repetitive actions of fetishistic thoughts and actions.

This account of fetish stresses the *repetitiveness* of fetishistic attachments. In the same manner that African totem-worship was counterposed to the 'rational' operation of civilised nations, the fetishists' sexuality is implicitly cast against a relatively more orderly and resolvable identification of 'sexual object'. Specifically, fetishes are identified

most readily where orientations are directed away from 'conventional' heterosexual sex. While broadly sympathetic towards his fetishising patients, Freud's 1927 introduction of the term claimed that his (male) patients consistently display:

*an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals (which) remains a stigma indelible of the repression that has taken place. (Freud 1927, 154)*

In other words, fetishes, trauma and repression are a closely linked triad or knot for psychoanalytic thinking. Each repeats, and so the grip remains tight.

Contrastingly for Marx, this repetition of views appears as a revolutionary necessity. A sensual view is not deceptive but only ever partial. Commodities must be combed over to be fully understood, their immediate appearance neither possible to set aside, nor ever fully relied on. To be grasped, the commodity must be passed over once and then again, each glance revealing differing features, and indeed the limits of the gaze itself.

Strikingly Marx does not attach the fetish-character to any one order of society, true to his *relational* view of classes (which are always taken as mutually defining, and co-operative, rather than 'stratified'). The fetish-character belongs not to any one fraction of society, but is a character of the capitalist commodity itself.<sup>5</sup>

Engaging with fetishised objects for Marx is simply a necessity of living in the context of a society dominated by capital. Fetish from this view is not a psychological quality at all. Marx calls neither the proletarian labourers nor bourgeois managers 'fetishists', reserving this term of judgement for the items they see produced together. The 'fetish' is not the tell-tale sign of an under-developed culture or a malformed psyche. It's simply an upshot of articles that bear several kinds of weight at the same time, making them difficult for any of us to grasp decisively. Their fetish character is true for anyone who lives in a society dominated by their production, and circulation.

*Capital* introduces this more elevated aspect of commodities quite mockingly, with the

super-sensual aspect being referred to as 'metaphysical subtleties' and 'theological niceties'. At this point, Marx is satirically treating *himself* as much as anyone: the exercise of unfolding the fetish-character can quickly appear farcical. Could close examination of a Tupperware container, an apple, a coat or a trash film really yield spiritual or philosophical revelations?

That Marx not only believes this to be possible but *necessary* to grasp the logic of Capital, reveals that his talk of mysterious or queer commodities does not lead to any straightforward condemnation of our current circumstances. Rather than this approach to Capital being reducible to simply a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' alongside Freud (and Nietzsche), Marx offers an unmistakable rationalism alongside his critical bite.

Marx and Freud therefore both diverged in method and target. Freud offers us an account of an atypical formation in his clients' erotic landscape, while Marx's agenda is so broad as to be total. While Freud aimed to trace an unusual developmental pathway that forked his clients from normative (heterosexual) development, Marx hoped to identify fetish as a characteristic of the commodity. The commodity's two-facedness was relevant, not to those who had developed any particular fixation, but to all obliged to interact with them.

### III. Fetish-character within commodity's 'Dual Character'

Recent research into scholarly racism has identified 'fetish', along with 'taboo', as a key term in the formation of European bourgeois self-identification, especially through the discipline of anthropology. In this context, Marx's deployment of the term 'fetish' has been convincingly presented as a satirical ploy, in his broader critique of the bourgeois intellectual style. Just as Marx treated earlier political economy playfully, teasing out the absurd implications in its own terms, he appropriated the term 'fetish' exactly in resistance to the *spirit* of bourgeois cultural (comparative) investigations.

The late Christopher Chitty's history of sodomy explored how exposure to public sexuality sensationalised 'scandalised' bourgeois identity formation in France. Popular post-Revolution narratives centred on the perfect Parisian wanderer who, passing unsuspectingly through a park, ends up gasping over a cruising ground or public trade (Chitty, 2020). Just as the bourgeois wanderer, through public spaces, defined himself against the debauchery he happened across, the example of West African object worship was deployed to grasp the self-understanding of western rationalism's progress.

Keston Sutherland's essay "Marx in Jargon" (2008) presents the case that Marx's choice of the term 'fetish character' was quite calculated (a choice preserved in the French translation he approved but typically replaced with 'fetishism' in English translations). In situating this relation as a characteristic of the *commodity itself*, the typical externalization of anthropology was undercut. Through setting Marx's use of the term (applied to the commodity) along Freud's (applied to the psyches of his clients), we can see still more clearly the limits of 'fetishism' and 'fetishists' as found in Freud, which Marx's earlier work escapes. It's exactly the *universal* claim Marx makes concerning the fetish as capitalist worship-object that gives his work a lasting bite, and which has caused the double entendre of fetish to become slurred into a single, psyche-oriented sense of the term.

Today's exegetes of Marx have stressed that Marx's use of the term 'fetish' was in a quite different context to that which 21st century readers are familiar with. The meaning of the term distinctive to *Capital* requires some contextualisation, given the proliferation of 'Marxist' cultural theory across the 20th century. As Michael Heinrich puts it:

*Using the terms "fetish" and "fetishism" is widespread today. One speaks of "brand fetishism" if somebody only buys a particular brand, or speaking of certain sexual practices as "fetishism." This general usage of fetish to mean "something of exaggerated importance" was not usual in Marx's time....Fetishism was regarded as something primitive*

*and irrational, from which bourgeois society—which understood itself to be completely rational—sorely wanted to take distance. (Heinrich 2021, 143)*

While Heinrich's contextualisation of the term is welcome, if anything this *understates* the extent of the problem. Following from Sutherland's reading, Marx's intention in deploying 'fetish' was satirising the search for a lewd, mystified and barbarous that had defined more refined attempts at bourgeois self-fashioning. When we consider Marx and Freud's concepts of fetish in this light, the distinction between them becomes clear. What Marx slyly derided, Freud had mostly absorbed. Freud's presentation of 'fetish' refers a pathological population, and lacks the satirical bite of Marx's work on commodities. Freud's first essay featuring the term attributes fetishism as especially evident in Chinese foot-binders, who he referred to as sweepingly castration-anxious men alleviating their dread through (further) disfigurement of female appendages:

*Another variant, which is also a parallel to fetishism in social psychology, might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated. (Freud, 1927).*

Here Freud strayed well beyond his own (European) client base, to pass a wider cultural judgement.<sup>6</sup> The pathological view of fetish Freud applied clinically here, extended across foreign "civilisations" in exactly the style Marx had earlier sought to subvert.

If we're to escape sweeping assertions of fetishism as particular pathology, the merits of a non-psychological conception of fetish become clear. Taking fetish to be a personal and developmental set of compulsions is not the only way to approach the topic (nor even the best approach). *Capital's* distinctive ambition was that through commodity analysis we can unlock 'metaphysical

subtleties' and 'theological niceties', which invariably make *each of us* a fetishist. Through surveying the super-sensual, we can better grasp how the sensual captures each of us.

What I've aimed to show so far is the clear water between Marx's introduction of the commodity as a 'trivial thing'—requiring repeated examinations to unveil as mystified—and Freud's treatment of fetishes as a pathologically focused fascination—developed out of a 'special penis' serving as grit for developing psyches. Fetishes are usually taken to be quite particular things, so let's consider one case in point.

#### IV. Mysterious Piss

The 2019 documentary *Piss Off* (Baker 2019) provides us with a heroic distillation of the fetishist at work. The film's protagonist Athleticpisspig used work trips as a means to film group urination scenes at locations around the world. Filmed repeatedly drenching his own wiry frame and those of other men with urine, pisspig shares freely his singular fascination and organising nous. These gatherings of like-minded gay guys were filmed and uploaded to various fetish sites, until Athleticpisspig was finally outed to his workplace (leading to a hasty mass deletion.) In the wake of this, the documentary serves as a resistant trace of an underground legend.

At the time of filming, our protagonist pisspig seemed unperturbed by any nation's law enforcement (who he never so much as mentions), instead explaining enthusiastically how he pioneered the use of pre-prepared plastic bottles to extend the length, intensity and mess of his clandestine gatherings. While keeping his face out of frame, throughout *Piss Off* pisspig is filmed working out or clad in revealing tank tops — remarking that some men who'd otherwise have no interest in piss suddenly become willing upon seeing his lean physique. Also interviewed are pisspig's fans (more willing to show their faces), who admirably remark on his tendency to both perform and upload more daring feats of public urination than they'd ever seen before. These admirers praise his

warm inclusiveness as his travels took them to their cities, with the documentary following these meet-ups across continents.

While the film is light on anti-capitalist (or even anti-state) flourishes, it's clearly implied that pisspig's unspecified corporate post enables his globetrotting passions, flows of Capital guiding another variety. For their part, his fans seem to take little interest in his 'true identity' — unmasking the man behind the pig — welcoming him instead to their hometowns as a distilled persona.

So intense was pisspig's fanbase's enthusiasm for his work, he took to selling athleisurewear soiled during productions. This one-pig business faced challenges such as storing the items until they were sufficiently heady in their stench, without leaving his apartment uninhabitable — and packaging them securely for postage. At one of his many single purpose meet-ups, a fan appears wearing a garment pisspig had saturated in a video shot months before.

At first, we might see this film as reflecting a sketch of the fetishist in the Freudian sense of the word. *Piss Off's* protagonist shows the lasting salience of Freud's 1927 remark that few fetishists approached him with a mind to banish their key desire:

*For though no doubt a fetish is recognized by its adherents as an abnormality, it is seldom felt by them as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life.<sup>7</sup> (Freud 1927, 152)*

Athleticpisspig displays both the creativity and circumscription that define the 'fetishist' as popularly understood: honed around a singular fixation that allows for variations, but rarely true alternations. This type of fetish is a psychological mechanism that consumes more or less attention, reiterating and emphasising itself, demanding incessant revisiting in ways that appear to resist lasting satiation and often enough can ruin friendships, reputations, careers.

A 'fetishist' in this sense of the word (at this point, clearly the best understood use of the term)

is animated by a precise loop of sensual responsiveness. The fetish comes to fill their mind, demand their attention even at the most inconvenient moments, and compel their actions to the outer limits of social acceptability. Their fantasy lives (and in advanced cases, their actual waking hours) become filled with honed moments of intensity that seem at once precise (in their content), and unbounded (in their demands on the fetishist's overall cognition).

In the case of Athleticpisspig, this presented itself in a continual hunt for new locations: abandoned public urinals, elevated bridges, new countries, and constant networking with like-minded men.

But from another view, that celebrations of their internet icon from the piss enthusiasts captured in this documentary towards its world-straddling protagonist resolved so quickly in the production and distribution of drenched sportswear, shows us equally the pervasiveness of fetish-character in Marx's sense.

Sexual expressiveness is one place that interactions between the sensual and super-sensual

will play out. While Freudian accounts present solace in the shared plight of those directed by their unconscious (all of us), Marx's account instead directs us towards a development of *consciousness*. A rational understanding of why it is commodities mystify and confound us, why our senses can never be fully relied upon to make clear sense of them, and why the most gnarled prejudices (against the practices found in Africa, China, and wherever else) apply with equal severity to any location dominated by commodity production.

And returning to Athleticpisspig once more, why was it that the highest expression of devotion his fanbase could think of was purchasing his by-products – turning tracksuits and tanktops into gold, spinning value from waste?

We can watch *Piss Off* and see at first sight a study in psychological compulsion, before another viewing reveals a piss devotee turned producer – a leader whose followers (almost without realising) make from their carefree hero an alchemic labourer.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted by Morris (2018), 248.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Eine Waare scheint auf den ersten Blick ein selbstverständliches, triviales Ding. Ihre Analyse ergibt, daß sie ein sehr vertracktes Ding ist, voll metaphysischer Spitzfindigkeit und theologischer Mucken.' (MEGA 1991, II.8: 100) As *Capital* continues Marx later uses the same formulation of 'first sight' versus closer examination to discuss various features of Capital, including exchange value, and money (Marx 1991, 108, 185). Marx in this way instructs the reader to look, and then look again.
- <sup>3</sup> Marx's argument concerning commodity's fetish-character corresponds to *Capital's* view that labour power has a twofold character. The introduction of fetish precedes two chapters exploring the commodity's formative trajectories (in exchange and money/circulation).
- <sup>4</sup> My treatment of Freudian 'fetishism' here will be rather more brief and primarily establish him as a counterpoint, given his definition is surely more widely understood in its own terms among sexuality scholars than Marx's 'fetish-character'.
- <sup>5</sup> The first references to specific class actors interacting with commodities appear in the subsequent chapters on money-form and circulation, strikingly beginning with capitalists, merchants, usurers and 'misers', rather than proletarians. The fetish-character, by contrast, is for everyone.
- <sup>6</sup> For broader context on orientalisating themes across Freud's career, see Said (2003).
- <sup>7</sup> (By contrast, the film seems to provide decisive proof that Freud's claim in the same lecture, that fetishism allowed men to avoid becoming homosexuals, was unfounded...)



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