

THE FETISH AND ITS ANTIS

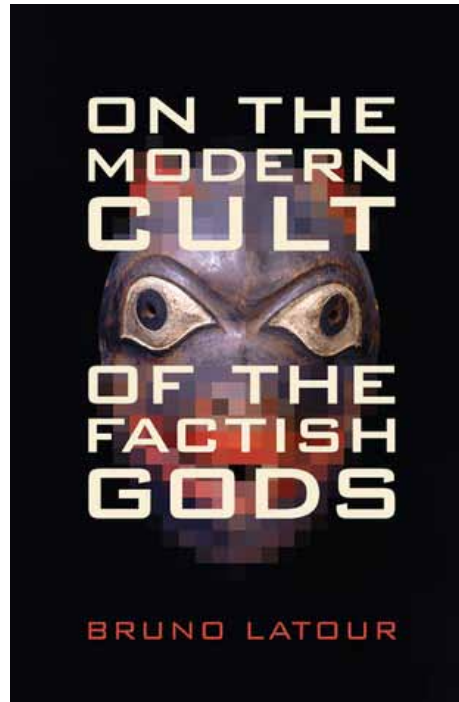
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Hylton White takes issue with the way the ontological turn – in actor-network theory and more generally through the effects of Latourian thinking in the humanities – has framed our understanding of the history of critical theory, and our sense of both its tasks and its potentials. In defending a kind of critical theory addressed to understanding the development of modes of subjectivity, he “pushes back” against a criticism that has swept across the humanities with tremendous rhetorical force in the last ten years.

I think Latour has based his thoughts in important ways on a deep confusion about the very ideas he wants to posit as the target of his ‘critique of critique’. The unavoidable sense is that debating Latour by tackling these claims head-on is to find oneself playing the wrong game: ‘He says that they say... But they *don’t* say that... And then...’ So maybe what is needed is less a pushing-back than a side-stepping gesture, back to truer ground.

A side-stepping of what? The term I want to address is one that has driven a line in Latour’s work since the 90s, and has now taken centre stage again in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. The figure, that is, of the fetish. Or more precisely, the fetish as the obsession, as Latour would have it, of puritanical modernist ‘antifetishism’. That second specification is very important. Where does Latour find the fetish? He finds it, of course – and the irony will not go unnoticed – in the middle of a kind of



The book cover of *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* by Bruno Latour

subjectivity. In the middle of a paranoid concern, he says, with drawing the line between people and things. One way he thinks that line is policed is by self-important scholarly heirs to theologies of iconoclasm. Wherever it is suggested that things have agency, ‘antifetishists’ take their task as a calling to expose the human will that lurks behind the thing, and thereby to restore the ontological supremacy of the unentangled subject.

No doubt there are people who have made these kinds of ‘antifetishist’ arguments. They are not very good or compelling ones, and more to the point, they do not have very much to do with the arguments we normally associate with critics who use the word

‘fetish’ in their thinking. More on that in a minute, but let us first unpack a bit further just what Latour seems to mean by ‘antifetishism’, when he tackles it as a failing of critical inquiry.

AN UNREAL HYBRID

Latour tells us that two false propositions come together in ‘antifetishism’. The first is, of course, the idea that the world of bodies and things is a screen onto which deceitful representations are cast. The second tenet: that therefore any attribution of agency to non-human beings is a misrecognition of representations as real, calling for an act of demystification.

The devil is in that ‘therefore’. What I want to suggest is that actually Latour is conflating two very different – one might even say incompatible – traditions of critique. He fixes a repetitive similarity between two ways of thinking that have much more often found themselves at odds in critical inquiry than allied in the putative ‘antifetishism’ Latour wants us to abandon.

On the one hand, then, the idea that the material world is a screen onto which a variety of representations are cast. Latour is closest to home ground here, to a way of thinking that runs from at least Rousseau to Durkheim and on into some varieties of poststructuralism. The key thing is that this way of thinking posits or entails a very definite ontology: one in which the world is split between free material bodies on the one hand and entrapment by conventions, representations and norms on the other. A struggle, then, between lively things and deadly conceptualizations. And against the deeper backdrop of this ontology, a vision of the social world as well, as

a space in which collective representations function as laws. And finally, then, the task of critique: to expose how representations violate bodies and things through epistemic violence.

Whatever the insights afforded by this kind of thought – I would like to suggest that close consideration is not very kind to it – the point I want to underscore is something else, and that is just how far this is from the kinds of thought that come to mind when we think about the usages of ‘fetish’ as a concept in critical theory. Above all we think here of Marx, and I want to take us specifically to Marx’s thought on the fetishism of commodities. But first let us think in even broader terms about the ontology historical materialism inherits from its ancestors. The freedom of the subject is the key concern of thinking here, subjectivity being grasped as an emergent condition, a property of worldly actors who come into being in the middle of things. In the middle, that is, of a world of material forces, with which subjectivity interacts, in processes that join it to itself and to the other subjects it finds in the world along with it. In no way, then, is the subject ontologically split from the world here in the essential terms in which bodies and representations oppose each other in the tradition of Rousseau. This is important above all because it means that in the ontology entailed in critiques of fetishism the material world is always already the underpinning of intersubjectivity and social life. So the question here is not how representations tie things down. The question here is what configurations of the (material) world are hospitable to the emergence, in it, of more or less free forms of subjectivity.

Already it should be clearer how the Latourians are confused about their object. But what of the

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‘fetish’ in critical Marxist thinking? Why would such a materialist ontology of the subject find good company in a critique of so-called ‘fetishism’? What purpose to a term like that, in a way of thinking that always already embraces materiality as the space in which subjectivity is convened?

The key thing here is a specification Latour always seems to drop from his account of things when he talks about ‘antifetishism’. In Marxist thought, at any rate, fetishism is specifically the fetishism of commodities. It does not refer in general terms to the role of things as such in human affairs, which Latour keeps representing as the paranoid obsession of the modern. Instead it refers to one specific form of life, to a form of life distinguished not by the *fact* that things are vital to it but rather by the specific way they mediate subjectivity in one important relationship.

There is no short way to sum up Marx’s argument on this issue without distorting it. But his major claim is of course that the form of life in which we see at work a fetishism of commodities is a form of life that fails to gather subjects as material actors implicated consciously and freely in concretely complex chains of material action. To put the point another way, the fetishism of commodities is precisely *not* a claim about the conceptual relationships – true or false – that people have with things. Marx locates the material relationship between people and things in the use-value of the commodity. But in capital, as he goes on to argue, the use-value of the commodity becomes a bearer of something else entirely.

Material things are assembled or convened here in relation to one another as the media, very specifically, of a form of life that is organized around the circulation of abstract labour-power. The fetishism of commodities describes a relationship not between people and things, in short, but rather a particular kind of relationship between things, a relationship that is structured in a specific way that appears to put the subject to the side.

(Since this is a claim about a form of life, or a generalized form of social interdependence in an epoch, it does not depend on concrete ties of employment in any particular situation. Marx’s argument therefore does not lose its grip in contexts of mass unemployment, where labour-power as social life impresses its structural presence through the effects of its concrete absence.)

MIND THE GAP

The object of Marx’s critique, in short, is precisely the *separation* of people and things in a way that works to dematerialize conditions for the free creation of both. This is where the suggestion that Marx is a Puritan begins to seem particularly off-beam. And if this is what the ‘fetish’ involves as a term of critique, then the point concerning Latour should be clear. The core of the concept of fetishism simply cannot be comprehended in terms of questions to do with representation (and therefore, with ‘misrepresentation’). The fetishism of commodities is not a misrepresentation of things by people who require a changing of mind so they can be freed from mystification. On the contrary, for the thing to be so susceptible to collective (mis-)representation would precisely require a world of richly elaborated intersubjectivity

– the very thing that Marxist thought sees missing in the world as structured by capital. The fetishism of commodities is not an idea concerning things – for its critics, or for anyone – but rather a specific kind of material *relationship* in a form of life that constitutes, inter alia, an alienated subject. The claim is that it makes thinking very difficult, not that it over-impresses ideas on things. There are no doubt species of critics who invoke ‘fetishism’ to refer to a projection of misrepresentations of agency onto things. But Marx is not among them. Latourian ‘antifetishism’ is thus a label that fails to grasp the very thing for which it is intended.

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But what, then, of the intellectual claim Latour most famously derives from this critique of ‘antifetishism’ – the claim that the obsession with demystification is why critique has lost its power to shape the world around it. It is hard to contest his insight here. The gap between ‘high theory’ and ‘effective thinking’ can seldom have been wider than it has in the last generation of critical inquiry. It is stretched so far at this point that we can only assent when Latour says that it is stretched beyond a point of productive tension, threatening instead to separate thought entirely from its purchase on a changeable reality. But what are we to deduce from this? Latour would tell us the problem lies with us – with the ethics and the tactics of our thought. But is this not a supremely unlikely move for an ontological thinker to make? What of the world in which thinking comes to exist? What if we took the gap between theory and

consequence really seriously, instead of trying to outperform it with more enterprising practices and better habits of work?

In this regard as well, Marxist critical theory gives us much better tools for composing a historical ontology of the problem. Unlike for Rousseau and his heirs, Marx regards the vantage point of the concrete as an inadequate one for critique in the age of capital. Instead, he proposes, capitalist development provides the grounds of its own critique through the very forms of abstraction that it produces. Thinking through the device of these historically emergent abstractions lets us make our thought suspicious of any concretely existing state of affairs. But this requires precisely that there be a restless movement of abstractions in potentially *contradictory* directions. That is how the development of capital allows us to point to an outside beyond it, rather than before it or without regard to the ways it has reconstituted the ground of all our activity.

One cannot say exactly yet what aspects of our time have made it so bereft of productive contradiction, of the sort that points beyond a sense of crisis to a definite hypothetical alternative. But we can discern the effects of this on our thought. Even those radical theorists who insist on keeping the project of freedom in mind for critical inquiry can only seem to talk of new historical prospects at this time by referring to the metaphysics of acts or events that would interrupt time – brought to life by a will that lies beyond history and can thus appear to redeem it. They seldom turn to the grounded critiques of historical possibility that once drove critical inquiry, and in that regard – my final point – their thought resembles nothing so much as the interwar theory of thinkers such as Benjamin, who have also seemed

unusually compelling to us in this generation.

Our times are very troublingly like the 30s, to be sure – and maybe that is really why it seems as if critique has run out of steam. Perhaps the question is not so much what is wrong with critical theory, but rather what is wrong with a world where thought seems so unreal.