

# That Hideous Pagan Idol: Marx, Fetishism and Graven Images

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*The importance of the idea of fetishism in Marx's work hardly needs to be argued, especially in light of the famous passage in Capital concerning commodities. However, the extent of Marx's engagement with fetishism has rarely been explored in full, nor has its complex relationship with the religious idea of idolatry. In order to explore both issues, this article is divided into two parts. The first traces Marx's initial encounter with the idea in the work of Charles de Brosses and then the various modifications of the idea in Marx's hands in order to provide new angles on alienation, labour, money, commodities and then capital as a whole. The second part picks up the persistent religious analogies in Marx's treatments of fetishism and then backtracks in order to uncover the connections with idolatry. We visit de Brosses once again, encounter Marx's Ethnological Notebooks, come across a striking connection the biblical critique of idolatry, and explore the way the new category of fetishism absorbs and transforms idolatry. This second part closes by critiquing the efforts by liberation theologians to appropriate Marx's use of fetishism for a renewed theological critique of idolatrous capitalism. Promising in some respects, what liberation theology misses is the sting in the tail of the Marx's development of fetishism.*

*Keywords:* Karl Marx; fetishism; Idolatry; Alienation; Labour; Money; Capital; Bible; Liberation Theology

When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production . . . then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.<sup>1</sup>

My concern is twofold: to follow the variations and developments of the idea of fetishism in Marx's texts, from his very early writings through to some of the last he wrote; to show that within Marx's own writings, this motif of the fetish has significant overlaps with the biblical critique of idolatry. I hardly need to argue for the importance

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 12 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979 [1853]), p. 222.

of fetishism in Marx's thought, particularly since the famous section in *Capital*, 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof', has been one of the most fertile of his ideas. Yet what is far less known is that the idea of fetishism traces a consistent but complex path from Marx's youthful engagement with early work on the history of religion (especially Charles de Brosses) through to its full flowering as an insight into the workings of the whole of capitalism. But that is only half the story, for Marx also appropriates in a rather complex fashion the critique of idolatry. That critique comes to him not merely from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), a text he studied in his university years, but also from the very same material from which he drew the idea of fetishism. Patience and comprehensiveness are needed in such detective work, so my treatment necessarily lengthy. For that reason I have divided it into two parts. The first carefully traces the first encounter, appropriation and modifications of the idea of fetishism; the second backtracks and sets its sights on the spoor of the idol, now with a view to its connections with fetishism.

### Fetish

Marx was not like those—unfortunately too many—who become opinionated even before they become grey and grumpy. He was fascinated until the end of his life by all manner of topics, including the emerging study of the history of religions. It first drew him in when was preparing the lost work on Christian art in the early 1840s<sup>2</sup> and then, close to the end of his life, it was one of the subjects he studied over the period from 1880 to 1882. In particular, he was taken by the topic of fetishism, which turns up in his earliest pieces of journalism and then again in the last pages of one of his most curious texts, *The Ethnological Notebooks*.<sup>3</sup> Over the four decades in between the idea of fetishism became a multi-purpose tool.

<sup>2</sup> See the tantalizing references in Karl Marx, 'To Arnold Ruge in Dresden, March 5, 1842', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1902]), pp. 382–3; Karl Marx, 'Marx an Arnold Ruge in Dresden, Den 5ten März 1842', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 27 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1902]), pp. 397–398; Karl Marx, 'To Arnold Ruge in Dresden, March 20, 1842', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1902]), pp. 383–386; Karl Marx, 'Marx an Arnold Ruge in Dresden, Den 20ten März 1842', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 27 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1902]), pp. 399–401; Karl Marx, 'To Arnold Ruge in Dresden, April 27, 1842', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1902]), pp. 387–388; Karl Marx, 'Marx an Arnold Ruge in Dresden, Den 27. April 1842', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 27 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1902]), pp. 402–403. See also the discussions by Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, transl. Ralph B. Winn (New York: Pluto, 1973 [1933]) and Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 61–62. Where possible I have cited both English translation and the German original of the work of Marx and Engels (where one exists, for not all that is available in English has been published in German and some of Marx's texts were first published in English). The date of original publication is listed in square brackets.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972). Marx's adaptation of fetishism is of course one way in which the idea has been used. For a comprehensive discussion of the fetish's history in ethnography, the history of religion, Marxism, positivist sociology, psychoanalysis, the clinical psychiatry of sexual deviance, modernist aesthetics and Continental philosophy, see William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 9 (1985), pp. 5–17, William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, II', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (1987), pp. 23–45, William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, III', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 16 (1988), pp. 105–123.

*History of Religions*

It would be useful to have a copy of that manuscript on Christian art. But we don't, so in order to see what Marx made of fetishism in his early years of study, let me refer to one example from the writings of those years. It appears in his discussion of the new wood 'theft' laws in his third article on the *Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly*.<sup>4</sup> The law was directed against the peasants who were now being denied the ancient right of gathering fallen wood in the lord's estate. Here is Marx:

The *savages of Cuba* regarded gold as a *fetish of the Spaniards*. They celebrated a feast in its honour, sang in a circle around it and then threw it into the sea. If the Cuban savages had been present at the sitting of the Rhine Province Assembly, would they not have regarded *wood* as the *Rhinelanders' fetish*? But a subsequent sitting would have taught them that the worship of animals is connected with this fetishism, and they would have thrown the *hares* into the sea in order to save the *human beings*.<sup>5</sup>

Not a bad estrangement effect, in which the 'savages of Cuba' become the sane and cultured subjects of the passage and the nobles of the Rhine Province Assembly become the 'savages'. *They* are the strange ones, concerned more with objects such as wood and gold, or perhaps the worship of animals (the reference is to a proposal to bar peasants from hunting hares as well), than human beings. Already there are two characteristic moves in regard to fetishism that Marx would use time and again. First, he takes the narrative of development from primitive to modern and inverts it, showing how we moderns are even more primitive than 'primitives' like the Cubans. Second, he points out that what seemed to have passed with a putative 'primitive' stage of human existence is actually still with us in a modern, scientific world. He

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, 'Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. Third Article: Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1842]), pp. 224–263; Karl Marx, 'Verhandlungen Des 6. Rheinischen Lantags. Dritter Artikel: Debatten Über Das Holzdiebstahlgsgesetz', *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 1:1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1975 [1842]), pp. 199–236.

<sup>5</sup> Marx, 'Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. Third Article: Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood', op. cit., pp. 262–263; Marx, 'Verhandlungen Des 6. Rheinischen Lantags. Dritter Artikel: Debatten Über Das Holzdiebstahlgsgesetz', op. cit., p. 236. See also Marx's comment on the French who are 'still dazzled by the sensuous glitter of precious metals, and are therefore still fetish-worshippers of metal money, and are not yet fully developed money nations'; Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1932]), p. 312; Karl Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 40 (Berlin: Dietz, 1990 [1932]), p. 552. See also his observations concerning the Assembly of the Estates of the Rhine Province, which has a tendency to 'canonise individuals' and to 'demand that we should bow down before the holy image of certain privileged individuals'; Karl Marx, 'Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. First Article: Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1842]), p. 169; Karl Marx, 'Die Verhandlungen Des 6. Rheinischen Lantags. Erster Artikel: Debatten Über Preßfreiheit Und Publikation Der Landständischen Verhandlungen', *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 1:1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1975 [1842]), p. 157. Finally, there is the polemic against Louis Napoleon: 'And the cast-down, broken idol can never be set on its pedestal again. He may recoil before the storm he has raised, and again receive the benedictions of the Pope and the caresses of the British Queen'; Karl Marx, 'A Historic Parallel', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 16 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980 [1859]), p. 273.

would use both moves to great effect when he adapted the idea of fetishism to his economic studies.

The reference to Cuba betrays the influence of the emerging study of the history of religions, itself a response to the increasing awareness of the sheer variety of religious practice outside Europe. But in this text Marx has already taken up the basic theory of fetishism: an object, often made by human hands, is granted supernatural powers over others and thereby has material and economic consequences. In other words, there is a transferral taking place from human beings to objects. Eventually this will become the argument that fetishism is the attribution of inherent value or powers to an object which then comes to dominate human beings. So also in the Rhineland Assembly, for their great attention to wood and hares, indeed the attribution of value to them, suggests for that they worship them as fetishes.

Where does this argument—the transferral characteristic of fetishism—come from? Marx first came across it in one of the books he read in the late 1830s or early 1840s in preparation for his work on Christian art, namely a translation by Pistorius of Charles de Brosses's 1760 work, *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*.<sup>6</sup> A pioneering work in ethnology and the history of religion, it introduces the use of parallels between what are felt to be contemporary 'primitive' societies (in this case West Africa) with ancient practices such as those in Egypt. Essentially the fetish (from the Portuguese *fetisso*) was an object attributed with superhuman and magical powers which directly affected human social interaction. Although de Brosses had little sympathy for these 'ridiculous' and 'stupid' practices, seeing them as signs of earlier barbarism, he sought to widen the use of the term from its particular situation in West Africa to apply to all animate and inanimate objects which were given divine properties.<sup>7</sup>

As Pietz has shown,<sup>8</sup> de Brosses's important work was but one moment in the longer story of fetishism. That story begins with the Portuguese colonial encounter, as they maintained their presence on the crucial route to the Indies, with African coastal societies in the 16th and 17th centuries. The term 'fetish' came to be used by the Portuguese as a way of describing the material religious practices encountered there, especially the amulets worn on the body or perhaps consumed. Above all, it was an effort to show that the Africans misunderstood the nature of material objects and to explain their 'irrational' resistance to mercantile activity. The category of the fetish emerges in the intersection of Christian feudal, African lineage and merchant

<sup>6</sup> Charles de Brosses, *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches ou Parallèle de l'Ancienne Religion de l'Égypte* (Paris: 1760).

<sup>7</sup> Brosses, op. cit., pp. 10–11. The word has had to fend off a series of efforts to describe its etymology. It is an English translation of the pidgin *Fetisso*, connected to the Portuguese *feitiço*, which in the late Middle Ages designated 'magical practices' or 'witchcraft'. However, efforts have been made to derive the word from Latin *fatum*, signifying both fate and charm (Brosses), *factitius*, linking the magic arts and the work of art or *facere*, designating the false representation of things sacred, beautiful, or enchanting. See Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', op. cit., p. 5; William Pietz and Emily Apter, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3–4.

<sup>8</sup> Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', op. cit., pp. 5–17; see also Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, II', op. cit., pp. 23–45; Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, III', op. cit., pp. 105–123.

capitalist social relations; it was the result of the intersection of two cultures which were incomprehensible to one another; it was elaborated by Enlightenment intellectuals in Europe from the late 18th century into a general theory of religion; it was even used by Dutch, French and English Protestants to describe Roman Catholic sacramental objects.

Already in his early twenties Marx found the idea of the fetish quite useful. Having read de Brosses and already appropriated fetishism as a tool for analysis in his early journalistic work with the *Rheinsische Zeitung*, even he could perhaps not foresee quite what would become of the idea. So let us see how it fares.

### *Economy*

The most well-known and endlessly discussed feature of fetishism is Marx's adaptation of the theory into economics.

### *Alienation and labour*

Our first stop is the treatment of the alienation of labour in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, written several years after the journal article on the wood 'theft' laws. Already Marx has seen the potential of the idea. A couple of passages stand out:

All these consequences are implied in the statement that the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself (*Es ist ebenso in der Religion. Je mehr der Mensch in Gott setzt, je weniger behält er in sich selbst*). The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object . . . The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', op. cit., p. 272; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', op. cit., p. 512. Similarly, 'Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. For this reason religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest, or again to a mediator, etc., since we are here dealing with the intellectual world'. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', op. cit., p. 279; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', op. cit., p. 519. See also Karl Marx, 'Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft of 1857–58) [Second Instalment]', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987 [1939–41]), pp. 209–210.

I couldn't ask for a clearer passage where the transferral characteristic of fetishism shows up. So we find that in the labour process the worker invests more and more of his life in the object produced. As he does so his own life drains away. The alien world of objects gains a life of its own; the objects produced by my hands become more powerful than me and rule over me. They wax and I wane. The ordinary products of labour become alien and powerful beings because of this transferral of powers and relations.

What is noticeable about this passage is the way theology makes an appearance. 'It is the same in religion', Marx writes, and then goes on to draw the analogy: 'The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself (*Es ist ebenso in der Religion. Je mehr der Mensch in Gott setzt, je weniger behält er in sich selbst*)'. This sentence strikes a distinctly Feuerbachian note, for as Feuerbach argued in *The Essence of Christianity*,<sup>10</sup> we put all our best into the projected divinity and thereby belittle ourselves in the process. So it is not for nothing that Marx uses *Gott*, who too becomes equivalent to the fetish produced and is not some other entity to which it points. This theological tenor will recur throughout the development of Marx's use of the idea of fetishism.

Another text from the same work makes a slightly different point:

If the product of labour is alien to me if it confronts me as an alien power, to whom, then, does it belong?

If my own activity does not belong to me, if it is an alien, a coerced activity, to whom, then, does it belong?

To a being *other* than myself.

Who is this being?

The *gods*? To be sure, in the earliest times the principal production (for example, the building of temples, etc., in Egypt, India and Mexico) appears to be in the service of the gods, and the product belongs to the gods. However, the gods on their own were never the lords of labour. No more was *nature*. And what a contradiction it would be if, the more man subjugated nature by his labour and the more the miracles of the gods were rendered superfluous by the miracles of industry, the more man were to renounce the joy of production and the enjoyment of the product to please these powers.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen Des Christentums* (Stuttgart: Reclam, Ditzingen, 1986 [1841]), Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, transl. George Eliot (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989 [1841]). Although he eventually became critical of Feuerbach's limited agenda, Marx was initially very enthusiastic about Feuerbach's achievement. See especially Karl Marx, 'To Ludwig Feuerbach in Bruckberg, Kreuznach, October 3, 1843', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1962]), pp. 349–351; Karl Marx, 'Marx an Ludwig Feuerbach in Bruckberg, 3. October 1843', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 27 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1962]), pp. 419–421; Karl Marx, 'To Ludwig Feuerbach in Bruckberg, Paris, August 11, 1844', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1958]), pp. 354–357; Karl Marx, 'Marx an Ludwig Feuerbach in Bruckberg, 11. August 1844', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 27 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1958]), pp. 425–428.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', op. cit., p. 278; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', op. cit., p. 518.

The reference to Egypt should alert us to de Brosses's book, since one of its main foci was precisely ancient Egypt. But now Marx distinguishes between three items: the labourer (personified by Marx himself), the product of labour and the gods. In the first text I quoted the object produced and God were elided into one, or rather God is merely an object (idol), but here they are distinct. Yet there is a catch, for people might have believed that they were working for the gods (or perhaps nature), but those gods were no more real then than they are now. Early labour 'appears to be in the service of the gods', but it is not actually so. They are the imaginary lords of labour, for the real lords of labour may be found elsewhere, although in this text they lurk in the shadows.

One further feature of this text echoes the one concerning the 'theft' of wood and hares: the polemical effect of the argument is to show that what people (especially the political economists) thought was the advance of science and industry is in fact a recurrence of the most superstitious and primitive of practices—fetishism. 'And what a contradiction it would be', Marx begins his last sentence. At times he argues that only in capitalism do we find that all these older trappings of religion and politics have been stripped away and the pure exploitation of the economic relation has been laid bare.<sup>12</sup> At other times he feels that the contradictory re-emergence of older superstitions is being realised.

So what is the answer to this fetishism or idolatry, to this externalisation that sucks the life out of human existence and social relations? Already in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx is perfectly clear: we need to get rid of these projections, estrangements and objectifications—whether the gods or the external objects produced by our hands that take on the power of the gods. Or rather, we need a social and economic situation in which they are no longer needed.

The way Marx does this is to tackle the doctrine of creation with a series of dialectical twists.<sup>13</sup> The most difficult thing, he points out, is to believe that we are our own creators. That entails giving up the belief that I am created by another being, a belief that makes me dependent on that other who is the very source of my life and my continued maintenance. Instead of human beings and nature being the creations of a higher being, Marx argues that they exist on their own account. Or, to push it further, the interaction of human beings and nature means that they are constantly in the process of creation. This reality makes any question about the origin of nature or human beings—who begot the first man or the earth?—abstract and superfluous.

<sup>12</sup> 'The whole content of the relation, and the mode of appearance of the conditions of the worker's labour alienated from labour, are therefore present in their pure economic form, without any political, religious or other trimmings. It is a pure money-relation. Capitalist and worker. Objectified labour and living labour capacity. Not master and servant, priest and layman, feudal lord and vassal, master craftsman and journeyman, etc.' Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 30 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988 [1976–82]), p. 131; Karl Marx, *Ökonomisches Manuskript 1861–1863, Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 43 (Berlin: Dietz, 1990 [1976–83]), p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> See Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', op. cit., pp. 304–306; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', op. cit., pp. 543–546.

*Money and Christology*

Our next stop is the commentary, found in the Paris notebooks, on the French translation of James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy* (in 1844 Marx's English was still not up to scratch). The argument is strikingly similar to the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*—not surprising, given that Marx wrote them at around the same time. Yet Marx also experiments with extending and adapting the basic ideas. This time the issue is the mediation of money and his prime analogy is Christ, the mediator between heaven and earth.

The logic is the same: the mediating activity of money 'is estranged from man and becomes the attribute of money, a *material thing* outside man'.<sup>14</sup> Again we find the blend of the Feuerbachian inversion and the transferral characteristic of fetishism, all of which dehumanises and downgrades human beings. Yet there is a difference from Marx's in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*: apart from the obvious Hegelian terminology (alienation, estrangement and externalisation), the issue in this case is not an object per se, but relations—between human beings and things as well as those between human beings. For example, if I gather two or three old bicycles and make a working one out of the various parts, I am the one who mediates between myself and the bicycle. But if I go out and hand over cash for a bicycle, a different relationship ensues in which money is the mediator. Money becomes an 'alien mediator',<sup>15</sup> a power over human beings that controls all these relations, sapping them of their one-time human power. So, while money 'circulates', while it becomes a common language, while the dollar rises and falls, human relations become ever more utilitarian and exploitative. It is the classic relation of fetishism, except that now the fetish is the alien mediator:

All the qualities which arise in the course of this activity are, therefore, transferred to this mediator. Hence man becomes the poorer as man, i.e., separated from this mediator, the *richer* this mediator becomes.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, 'Comments on James Mill, *Éléments D'économie Politique*', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1932]), p. 212; Karl Marx, 'Auszüge Aus James Mills Buch *Éléments D'économie Politique*'. Trad. Par J.T. Parisot, Paris 1823', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 40 (Berlin: Dietz, 1990 [1932]), p. 446.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* See also the comments in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*: 'The distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternisation of impossibilities—the *divine* power of money—lies in its *character* as men's estranged, alienating and self-disposing *species-nature*. Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*' (Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', op. cit., p. 325; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', op. cit., p. 565.). Further: 'Money, then, appears as this *distorting* power both against the individual and against the bonds of society, etc., which claim to be *entities* in themselves. It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, idiocy into intelligence, and intelligence into idiocy. Since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and confuses all things, it is the general *confounding and confusing* of all things—the world upside-down—the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities'. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', op. cit., pp. 325–326; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte Aus Dem Jahre 1844', op. cit., pp. 566–567.



The theological analogies are not far away. The first reads: 'It is clear that this mediator now becomes a *real God*, for the mediator is the *real power* over what it mediates to me'.<sup>17</sup> Fetish and the god have folded yet again into one and the same item. This mediator has its worshippers and cult, it draws more and more power unto itself, it determines how human beings should relate to one another, and only those who represent this mediator (its priests and ministers) have any value or power. And what is its fundamental function? It mediates, becomes the initiator, lubricator and facilitator of human interaction. Yet the analogy is not as clear as it could be, so another follows soon afterwards:

Christ *represents* originally: 1) men before God; 2) God for men; 3) men to men. Similarly, *money* represents originally, in accordance with the idea of money: 1) private property for property; 2) society for private property; 3) private property for society.<sup>18</sup>

In the same way that Christ is the signal of a relation—what might be called the Christ-relation—so also the money-relation is the key, not money itself as an object. Money, then, functions in an analogous fashion to Christ. But why make the connection in the first place? Marx could just as easily have argued that money is a mediator without the Christological connection. Is he merely having some polemical fun at the expense of theology? Perhaps, but I would suggest that the theological undercurrent I identified earlier is not mere happenstance. More of that later, but after pondering this brief passage in Marx's notebook on James Mill I can no longer read the long section on money in the *Grundrisse* without thinking of this earlier text.

### *Commodities and capital*

My final ports are the mature works of the 1860s, especially the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63* and *Capital* itself. The section in *Capital*—'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof'—is a place worn down with many crossings. Hordes have descended on these few pages, sat for a while, taken a few photographs, argued heatedly and then moved on. The basic argument is all too well known: commodity fetishism is an inverse relationship in which the social relations of labour are transformed into apparently objective relations between commodities or money.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. See also Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 (First Version of Capital) [Grundrisse]*, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 28 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986 [1939-41]), pp. 154, 64; Karl Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857/1858 [Grundrisse]*, *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 42 (Berlin: Dietz, 2005 [1939-41]), pp. 148, 58; Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft of 1857-58) [Second Instalment]*, p. 216; Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987 [1859]), p. 359; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I*, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 35 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1996 [1867]), pp. 142-143; Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik Der Politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band Buch I: Der Produktionsprozeß Des Kapitals*, *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 1972 [1867]), pp. 146-147.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. See also Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 (First Version of Capital) [Grundrisse]*, op. cit., p. 257; Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857/1858 [Grundrisse]*, op. cit., p. 250.

However, as with the passage on money I discussed above, it is not so much the commodity itself that becomes the fetish but the commodity-form, the notion that so many vastly different products may be exchanged in terms of their value.

This time the extension of the basic logic of fetishism to commodities seems like a small step, yet Marx gives it a whole new meaning. The connections with his earlier argument concerning money are obvious: once again it involves both transfer and illusion. Commodity fetishism transfers the properties of inter-human relations in the context of labour to relations between humans and commodities and between commodities themselves—so also with money. To the belittlement of human relations it transfers human attributes and powers onto the commodity-form—so also with labour and money. As Marx puts it, this transferral is a ‘mysterious thing, simply because 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.’<sup>19</sup>

In order to interpret Marx’s complex argument in this section of *Capital*, I need to unfold a crucial three-fold distinction in relation to fetishism: the labourer who produces an object; the object itself (whether amulet, product or a relation); the powers that the object holds, or at least is believed to hold. In the case of original fetishism, those powers are held to derive to be ‘magical’ and derive from a deity or two. With commodity production, the properties come from the process of production and are transferred from human beings to the object in question. As I work through the following argument, this distinction will be central, for Marx seems to oscillate, sometimes opening up some distance between the object and the beliefs concerning it (divine powers) and at others collapsing them together.

Marx begins the section on commodity fetishism with the oft-quoted statement: the analysis of the commodity ‘shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties (*voll metaphysischer Spitzfindigkeit und theologischer Mucken*)’<sup>20</sup>—hardly a subtle hint that there is a significant theological residue here. Marx is, of course, no more enamoured with theology than he has been, but it has a distinct use. However, soon enough we come across a thorny passage:

There [with commodities] it is a definite social relationship between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of the 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 the 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 product of men’s hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to products of labour,

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., pp. 82–83; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 86. See also Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63 (Conclusion): A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol. 34 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994 [1976–82]), p. 450.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 81; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 85.

so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>21</sup>

The first impression is that Marx has collapsed the distinction between the objects themselves—both commodities and their relations—and the properties they hold: fetishism is the power that attaches to commodities and is inseparable from them. There are at least three possible ways to interpret this passage. One option is to argue that the constant recourse to terminology derived from the leitmotiv of fetishism is that the transferral in question is illusory.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the belief that the commodity-form has an inherent value is as much a superstition and fantasy as the belief that a pretty object made out of iron or wood has supernatural power. The reality of economic and social relations between people is obscured through the mistaken belief that the commodity-form has its own power. Even more, it is not merely that this commodity-form has no value or power, that each commodity is merely a material object, but that human labour is responsible for the creation of this commodity. Marx stresses the human labour that goes into the making of the idol, which is then endowed with superhuman powers. In support of this reading, one could point out that Marx wants to find out how the commodity becomes ‘transcendent’, how these ‘grotesque ideas’ are produced in the first place, especially since they justify the degradation and misery of countless labourers.<sup>23</sup> In fact, these few pages rain down such terms—‘mystical character’, ‘mysterious thing’, ‘fantastic form’, ‘mist-enveloped’, ‘abstraction’, ‘social hieroglyphic’, ‘incarnation of abstract human labour’, ‘magic and necromancy’, ‘mystical veil’, ‘unsubstantial ghost’, ‘superstition’, and ‘illusions’. In the midst of industrial capitalist society an ancient superstitious practice is alive and well. In short, Marx uses the terminology of fetishism, for Marx seeks to demystify and debunk these illusory beliefs and show that these various items are nothing more than economic relations constructed by human beings.

Another interpretation is to argue that Marx’s use of the idea of fetishism less than helpful. In a widely quoted observation, Norman Geras suggests that ‘the analogy is inexact, for the properties bestowed on material objects in the capitalist economy are, Marx holds, real and not the product of the imagination’.<sup>24</sup> I must admit that Marx is a little misleading in the passage I quoted above, for he moves directly from commodity relations to the gods, as though they are analogous. Geras prefers other terms Marx uses, especially those drawn from nature and society: the properties and powers transferred from human social relations to those between commodities appear natural. But that is an illusion: the belief that the powers are in some sense inherent to commodities is false. Geras goes on to stress that the powers themselves

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, op. cit., p. 83; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., pp. 86–87.

<sup>22</sup> Pietz, ‘The Problem of the Fetish, I’, p. 10, takes this line, arguing that the fetish designates false consciousness. Louis Dupré, *Marx’s Social Critique of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 49, also tends in this direction.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 639; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 674.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Geras, ‘Fetishism’, in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 165.

are no illusions. He would rather use terms such as mask and disguise, encouraged by Marx's desire to tear off the veil and uncover what is really going on.

We can distinguish between these two readings in terms of the threefold schema I mentioned above, particularly the relation between the object made and the powers that it holds. The first option assumes that both the powers and the transferral of powers between human beings and fetishes are illusory; there is no divine or fetishistic power, for only the material object is real, as well as human production of it. The second position differs by assuming that the powers themselves are all too real but that the beliefs about them and their origin are illusory. It seems to me that Geras is on the right track, but his problem is that it does not see that Marx has in fact collapsed the two terms of the fetish—object and the fetishistic powers that it holds. And that leads us to a third option: Marx fuses the two in an effort to move to a new level of understanding.

So Marx argues that the transferral of powers—from social relations between people to relations between things—is indeed real, for they appear to those producers as 'what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things'.<sup>25</sup> This fetishisation is real, since human beings become subjected to things and the alienated labour embodied within them. At the same time they are illusory and imaginary, since they are understood as natural, as givens of the world; people believe that things relate to one another in and of themselves, rather than realising that these relations have been transferred from human social relations. One way to consider Marx's argument is to ask what is real and what illusory. Obviously the worker, process of material production and social relations are real, as is the product produced. Now we come across the breakthrough, for the powers transferred and thereby gained by the product are also real and materially grounded, all of which then means that the effects on human beings are equally real. What are illusory are then the theories and beliefs about how these powers arose in the first place—this is where Marx's inversion comes into its own since he shows that the powers of the fetish came to be through a process very different from what people think. Yet here is the crux, for what workers, consumers and above all the economic theorists perceive and describe is quite real; they see 'what they are'. So we get the overlap or fusion: the commodity fetish has real powers which are described and explained in terms that are both mystical and realistic.

In an effort to explain this double-take, Marx tries various formulations, which take him well beyond the conventional opposition between illusion and reality. For example, the qualities of the products of labour 'are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses'.<sup>26</sup> Further, 'the mist' in which the social character of labour appears to belong to the products themselves by no mean 'dissipates'. He tries once again: even though it is possible to reveal the process of transferral and thereby how value appears in the product of labour, that value appears 'just as real and final,

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 84; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 83; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 86.

as the fact that, after the discovery by science of the component gases of air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered'.<sup>27</sup> Marx coins the strange phrase, 'socially valid as well as objective thought forms (*gesellschaftlich gültige, also objektive Gedankenformen*)',<sup>28</sup> in order to express this dual character of social relations and the transferred relations between commodities. In short, what Marx is saying is that the commodity-form and the value of abstracted labour it attracts are both illusory and real, mysterious and concrete, mist-enveloped and actual. The power they have is mystified and mist-enveloped, since people don't realise how it comes about, but it is all too real in terms of the powers commodities have and the alienating effects they have on people's lives.

What is good for labour, money and commodities is good for capital itself. In a delightful passage towards the end of the extraordinary *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63* Marx traces the way capital becomes a fetish. Here we find exactly the same logic: what appear to be forces and powers beyond the worker are in fact produced by free labour. The difference now is that all the various items I have already covered make an appearance, along with a few extras. He lists all the abstractions from the real, social process of labour, such as the capitalist as a personification of capital, the productive powers of capital, use value and exchange value, the application of forces of nature and science, the products of labour in form of machinery, wealth and so on. They confront the worker as alien, objective presences in advance that rule over him. In short, capital itself becomes a power before which the worker is powerless: all these items 'stand on their hind legs vis-à-vis the worker and confront him as capital'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, just like the commodity-form, capital 'becomes a very mysterious being'.<sup>30</sup> It is not for nothing that Marx writes of the 'religion of everyday life (*diese Religion des Alltagslebens*)',<sup>31</sup> elaborated as though it were theological dogma by political economists, when summarising the various parts of capital—wealth, the personification of things, the conversion of production relations into entities, interest, rent, wages, profit and surplus value. All of these suffer from the same dual process of fetishism.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 85; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, p. 90; my translation.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63 (Conclusion): A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, op. cit., pp. 457–458. See also the description of wealth as a fetish in Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, op. cit., p. 387.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63 (Conclusion): A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, op. cit., p. 459.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. III, Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 37 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1998 [1894]), p. 817; Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik Der Politischen Ökonomie. Dritter Band Buch III. Der Gesamtprozeß Der Kapitalistischen Produktion, Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 25 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1894]), p. 838. Apart from Walter Benjamin's oft-noted fragment, 'Capitalism as Religion' (Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1912–1926* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996), pp. 288–291), the theme has been developed in a very different direction from liberation theology or Marxism by a group of what may be called 'economic theologians' such as John Cobb, *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (New York Macmillan: 1999); M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); David Loy, 'The Religion of the Market', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65:2 (1996), pp. 275–290.

Let us take stock of the progress thus far. Marx encounters the idea of the fetish in the emerging study of the history of religions, specifically the work of Charles de Brosses, who uses the material from Portuguese encounters in West Africa in order to reconstruct the religion of ancient Egypt. For Marx, the fetish became an extraordinarily fruitful idea, appearing throughout his work from the earliest journalistic pieces with the *Rheinische Zeitung* to the great economic manuscripts of the 1860s. He would constantly remould the fetish, reshaping it for analysing alienation, labour, money as mediator, the commodity form and then capital as a whole, but it would always keep its core concept: the transferral of powers from human beings to the object in question, to the detriment of one and the gain of the other—this is the process of fetishisation. However, I also traced a theological undercurrent in all the examples I cited. Time and again Marx resorts to theological examples or analogies—the gods, Christology, the misty realms of religion. Are these references merely convenient, handy illustrations to make a point? I suspect not, but that is the subject of the second part.

## Idol

The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete (*Die Transsubstantiation, der Fetischismus ist vollendet*).<sup>32</sup>

My argument in this part may be stated succinctly: behind Marx's appropriation and use of the idea of the fetish is a theological, or more preferably a biblical, critique of idolatry. We must tread carefully, for tramping through with heavy theological boots will obliterate these delicate traces. I do not want to argue that critique of idolatry is the *fons et origo* of the theory of fetishism; rather, the category of fetishism was initially developed over against the long theological elaboration of idolatry, which turned out to be ill-suited for dealing with the amulets and objects that the Portuguese encountered in Africa. However, once the new category of the fetish had gained ground, becoming a comprehensive and all-embracing term in the history of religions, it then subsumed idolatry within itself.

### *From Idol to Fetish and Back Again*

In order to explore this winding path and the implications for Marx's use of the fetish, I need to backtrack to the earliest moment of this essay: the emergence of the idea of the fetish before Marx took it over. So let me return to the detailed study of fetishism by Pietz and the crucial work by de Brosses that Marx read in his early twenties. As Pietz points out, the most significant feature of fetishism was that it marked the emergence of a new term, which was needed since the traditional

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63 (Continuation): A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1989 [1976–82]), p. 494; Karl Marx, 'Theorie Über Den Mehrwert (Vierter Band Des Kapitals). Dritter Teil', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 26.3 (Berlin: Dietz, 1974), p. 485.

theological category of 'idol' was not felt to be adequate. He goes to great lengths to trace the way 'idolatry' developed as a comprehensive category in medieval theology, how it designated a false god with identifiable rituals, beliefs and objects of worship, and how its initial application by the Portuguese to the Africans didn't seem to work. So we find that 'fetish' was coined in order to take account of the direct material affects of the fetish in terms of physical and psychological well-being. It also was seen to play a central role in social ordering, irrational as that order may have seemed to the Portuguese. Indeed, traders would go as far as to swear an oath on a fetish in order to ensure a deal, much to the chagrin of the Church. This material and social feature of the fetish was unique, although it must not be forgotten that the terminology itself was an effort by the Portuguese to make 'sense' of the incomprehensible and to show how these 'primitive' Africans misunderstood the material nature of objects.

What happened to the theological category of idolatry? Here I need to go beyond Pietz, for in a stunning case of theoretical inversion, idolatry was absorbed into this new term, especially when we find complete theories of the earlier stages of religion framed in terms of primitive fetishism. A close study of de Brosses's work reveals this inversion in all its glory: he developed from an Enlightenment perspective a theory of primitive fetishism into which he incorporated idolatry.<sup>33</sup> In his effort at developing a theory of comparative religion based on the fetish, de Brosses set out to explain ancient Egyptian cultures in terms of fetishism, using the distorted information from Africa as his template.

Thus far I have scratched only the surface, for now de Brosses becomes interesting indeed: the primary 'source' for ancient Egypt, at least in de Brosses's time, was the Bible. Cutting back all the theological accretions surrounding the term 'idol', de Brosses uses precisely those biblical texts concerning Egyptian religion that refer to idolatry. So de Brosses mines biblical texts concerning idolatry as evidence for ancient fetishism; in the process idolatry in the Bible is effectively subsumed under the category of the fetish. For de Brosses, of course, the Bible was reasonably reliable in terms of historical information, for he wrote his book in the mid-18th century, before the first flowering of critical approaches to the Bible (a flourishing that took place in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, precisely when Marx and Engels had begun their own studies).

In a book liberally sprinkled with biblical quotations and references,<sup>34</sup> the most important passage is an analysis of two types of fetish in ancient Judah, namely the public and the personal or private. In the second group we find those 'qui sont pour l'ordinaire quelques animal, quelques être animé ou quelque idole grossièrement

<sup>33</sup> Brosses, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> For example, he mentions the serpent of Judah, the 'fetish of Evil-Merodah' and that the Babylonians are depicted as worshipping fetishes in Daniel 14 (Brosses, *op. cit.*, p. 26.). Other samples include Ezekiel 21:21 (pp. 105–106), 2 Kings 26:29 with its list of idols (p. 126), Ezekiel 8 and the list of fetishes worshipped by the Israelites, including the Canaanite Baal (p. 131), Genesis 31:13 (p. 136), Numbers 13:52 ff; Leviticus 31:1 ff, Deuteronomy 4:16 (p. 137), Genesis 31 (p. 139), and 1 Kings 12:29 (p. 143).

fabriquée de terre graffe ou d'ivoire'<sup>35</sup>—it is exactly the same definition for idol and fetish. In regard to the more public type of fetish, de Brosses outlines four types to which one would offer sacrifice at important occasions: the serpent, the trees, the sea and 'a small, ugly clay idol which presides over the councils'.<sup>36</sup> For de Brosses then, idolatry in the Bible is one shape that fetishism may take. Indeed, along with other sources the Bible provides him with a ready source of examples of the practice of fetishism in the ancient world. I can only speculate whether Marx picked up the connection—between fetishism and idolatry—when he read de Brosses's work, for we have no direct statement by Marx to that effect, but from all the evidence available it seems to be the case that Marx operated with such an assumption.

I would now like to pass to the other end of Marx's life, in the years between 1880 and 1882, when he was making the notes collected in *The Ethnological Notebooks* on the anthropologists L.H. Morgan (the basis for Engels's *Origin of the Family*), John B. Phear, Henry Maine and John Lubbock. Here Marx shows that he is still vitally interested in the study of comparative religion, an interest that had not abated from his reading of de Brosses some 40 years earlier. These notebooks are an extraordinary read, with sentences that jump around between German, English and French, good slabs of Greek and Latin and occasional terms from Russian, Sanskrit Ojibwa and so on, endless abbreviations, unfinished sentences, slang, vulgar terms, exclamations and references to current affairs.<sup>37</sup> However, the pages that draw me in are the few on that 'civilised ass' and pious 'wiseacre', Lubbock, for Lubbock deals with the history of religion. As he did in the criticism of wood 'theft' laws, Marx throws Lubbock's arguments back at him. If, suggests Marx, we take Lubbock's argument that the earliest human societies were atheists, then it is not because the savage mind was too undeveloped to recognise true religion. No, argues Marx, it was because religion is the result of a repressive system that included castes, slavery and monarchy. Those atheistic savages were far better off.

For my purposes, the next 'stage' in Lubbock's model of religious development is more interesting, for it contains an explicit discussion of idols and fetishes. According to Lubbock, idolatry is a sign of a slightly more developed 'savage' mind, but one that is given to sin. But here I want to read between the lines: what is striking is the way

<sup>35</sup> Brosses, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Marx's notes for Volume 2 of *Capital* were in a similar state, as Engels notes: 'The language was that in which Marx used to make his extracts: careless style full of colloquialisms, often containing coarsely humorous expressions and phrases interspersed with English and French technical terms or with whole sentences and even pages of English. Thoughts were jotted down as they developed in the brain of the author. Some parts of the argument would be fully treated, others of equal importance only indicated. Factual material for illustration would be collected, but barely arranged, much less worked out. At conclusions of chapters, in the author's anxiety to get to the next, there would often be only a few disjointed sentences to mark the further development here left incomplete. And finally there was the well-known handwriting which the author himself was sometimes unable to decipher.' Frederick Engels, 'Preface to the First German Edition of Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. II', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 36 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1997 [1885]), p. 5; Friedrich Engels, 'Vorwort an Das Kapital. Kritik Der Politischen Ökonomie. Zweiter Band Buch II. Der Zirkulationsprozeß Des Kapitals', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 24 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1885]), p. 7.



Marx interchanges the terms idol and fetish as though they mean the same thing. Marx notes that Lubbock argues that idols/fetishes may be objects, animals or human beings. In fact, most of his comments follow through on the last point: 'The *idol* usually assumes *human form*, and idolatry is closely associated with that form of worship which consists in the worship of ancestors.'<sup>38</sup> The examples pile on top of one another, from Siberia through Greece to Australia. But when Marx cites Lubbock on sacrifice the Bible turns up. Marx begins by noting that sacrifice may be either sacrifice *to* the idol or sacrifice *of* the idol. The latter he calls, quoting Lubbock, 'eating the fetish'. At this point four biblical texts appear: a reference to the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, the prescriptions for Israelite sacrifice of animals in Leviticus 7 (actually the whole of chapters 1–7 deal with sacrifice), Paul's comments on the origin of idolatry in Romans 1:23, and, last but by no means least, Christ's sacrifice, which is as good an example as any of 'eating the fetish'.

These few pages in *The Ethnological Notebooks* show that Marx didn't feel it was at all strange to use 'idol' and 'fetish' interchangeably. The important point is that he assumes they mean the same thing, or at least that, like de Brosses, he subsumed idolatry as a category under fetishism. And then in the midst of that easy interaction the Bible turns up with startling regularity. I hardly need to labour the point: like de Brosses's text, which he read some 40 years earlier, Marx uses the biblical texts on idolatry as though they were speaking of fetishism. Or rather, Marx chooses to make notes from Lubbock on precisely these matters.

### *Critique of Idolatry*

The theological tenor of Marx's examples of fetishism is beginning to make sense; the constant theological analogies whenever he invokes the category of fetishism to speak of labour, alienation, money and capital are by no means arbitrary. In a text Marx read in the late 1830s or early 1840s—the book by de Brosses—there is an explicit assumption that idolatry is part of the idea of fetishism, and then in the early 1880s Marx chooses to make critical notes on John Lubbock, where the same assumption turns up. Did Marx himself make the connection? He certainly had a liking for Moloch, the idol of the Ammonites, which demanded the sacrifice of children.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 343.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Marx, 'Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 20 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985 [1864]), pp. 10–11; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1845]), p. 21; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die Heilige Familie oder Kritik Der Kritischen Kritik*, *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz, 1972 [1845]), p. 21; Karl Marx, 'Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book *Das Nationale System Der Politischen Oekonomie*', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1971]), p. 226; Karl Marx, 'Marx to Engels in London, Algiers, 8 April (Saturday) 1882', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 46 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1992 [1931]), p. 234; Karl Marx, 'Marx and Engels 8 April 1882', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 35 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1931]), p. 54; Karl Marx, 'Agitation against Prussia—A Day of Fasting', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 14 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980 [1855]), p. 95; Karl Marx, 'Agitation Gegen Preußen—Ein Fasttag', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 11 (Berlin: Dietz,

However, I have deliberately left the most telling piece of evidence until last, for it draws the critique of idolatry and of fetishism even more closely together. In *The Ethnological Notebooks*, in that same section on Lubbock, appears one further reference to the Bible. Or rather, it is a full quotation of the Wisdom of Solomon 14:12–20—a deuterocanonical work. The ostensible point of quoting this text is to deride Lubbock's deployment of the text—an all-out polemic against idols—in order to produce a theory of the origins of the worship of statues as deities. For Lubbock the argument is both historical and theological: idolatry is a historical development due to an undeveloped 'primitive' mind and the human sin of not worshipping the one true God. Marx is not impressed with such abuse of the Bible; nor am I. So let us see what Marx does with this biblical text, which he quotes in full:

For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life;

For they did not exist from the beginning, nor will they last forever.

For through human vanity they entered the world, and therefore their speedy end has been planned.

For a father, consumed with guilt at an untimely bereavement, made an image of his child, who has been suddenly taken from him;

He now honoured as a god what was once a dead human being, and handed on to his dependants secret rites and initiations.

Then the ungodly custom, grown strong with time, was kept as a law, and at the commands of monarchs carved images were worshipped.

When people could not honour monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image of the king whom they honoured, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present.

Then the ambition of the artisan impelled even those who did not know the king to intensify their worship.

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1974 [1855]), pp. 132–1333; Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', p. 294; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Civic Militia Bill', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 7 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977 [1848]), p. 264; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Der Bürgerwehrgesetzentwurf', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 5 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1848]), p. 251; see also Frederick Engels, 'The Condition of the Working Class in England', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1846]), p. 474; Friedrich Engels, 'Die Lage Der Arbeitenden Klasse in England. Nach Eigener Anschauung Und Authentischen Quellen', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz, 1974 [1846]), p. 405; Frederick Engels, 'Engels to Natalie Liebknecht in Berlin, London, 1 December 1893', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 50 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2004 [1946]), p. 234; Friedrich Engels, 'Engels an Natalie Liebknecht 1. Dezember 1893', *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 39 (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1946]), p. 171.

For he, perhaps wishing to please his ruler, skilfully forced the likeness to take more beautiful form,

And the multitude, attracted by the charm of his work, now regarded as an object of worship the one whom shortly before they had honoured as a human being.

The context of Marx's notes is a discussion of human idols, but the context in *The Wisdom of Solomon* is the worship of objects made with human hands. It is a sustained polemic against idolatry, focusing on how stupid and sinful it is. But the polemic is not all that effective, for it makes the same point again and again: idolatry is simply the worship of false gods over against the one true God. For that reason Lubbock quotes it, providing him with a handy theological judgement on idolatry and thereby fetishism. Yet the point is rather superficial and it doesn't really get to the heart of idolatry. For a much deeper analysis we need to turn to the criticism of idolatry contained in the book of Isaiah, of which the text in the *Wisdom of Solomon* is a less than astute expansion.

For Isaiah, the construction of an idol is a deluded effort to attribute divine status to a material object made in the sweat of human labour. Or, as the text of Isaiah has it:

9 All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. 10 Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? 11 Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the artisans too are merely human. Let them all assemble, let them stand up; they shall be terrified, they shall all be put to shame.

12 The blacksmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. 13 The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. 14 He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. 15 Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. 16 Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!' 17 The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it, and worships it; he prays to it and says, 'Save me, for you are my god!'

18 They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. 19 No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, 'Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?' 20 He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Isaiah 44: 9–20. See also the explicitly political polemic in Isaiah 40: 19–20; 41: 6–7; 42: 17; 45: 16–17 and 46: 1–2, 5–7. Not to be outdone, Paul in the New Testament puts the same point in its own way. Thus, Paul argues that due to darkened minds (Romans 1:21) the dead, created thing comes to life and gains the power to rule and dominate human lives instead of God (Romans 1:23, 25).

The detail may be more graphic than Marx's brief notes on fetishism, but the underlying argument is the same: this inanimate product, made with ordinary, everyday labour out of metal or wood can never be more than the material out of which it is made. The worshipper may claim that it is a god, or that it bestows blessings and curses, but it is nothing of the sort. The passage from Isaiah plays up the sheer ordinariness of the idol with a good dose of satire. Indeed, it stresses the everyday materiality of the idol, one that punctures the exorbitant claims made for it. Like Marx, this text points out that the religious belief attached to the idol is a delusion. Like Marx again, it points to the need for an analysis of the material object in question and not the vapid claims made on its behalf.

However, this inversion—the true nature of the idol lies in its profane origins, in the effort to sacralise what is profane—relies on a deeper and more radical inversion. Here we need to fill in the steps that lie behind and make possible such a position. Rather than belittle the gods who are rivals to the Hebrew god, Yahweh, perhaps placing them in humiliating subordinate positions, the text of Isaiah denies the existence of all of these gods apart from Yahweh. This inversion then has a profound effect on all those signifiers of the gods—precisely the statues, keepsakes, amulets and so on. For if there are no gods to whom these objects point, then veneration and worship are no longer directed to the gods but to the objects themselves. In short, they become idols.

The underlying logic to this move is actually provided by the late imposition of monotheism.<sup>41</sup> The critique of—indeed, the very identification of idolatry as the worship of an animate or inanimate object—can happen only after the belated arrival of monotheism, which then generates its own critique of the earlier gods who make a rapid exit from the cosmos, without even a whiff of rocket smoke to mark their passing. The logic goes as follows: in order to have some visible and tactile presence to direct you towards and remind you of your god, you find a suitable animal or rock or make an elaborate figure out of wood or stone. Whenever you pass by and look at it, you call to mind your god, perhaps offering a prayer and leaving a little something to ward off danger, ensure rains or offer thanks. Your god is not physically present, so the figure becomes his earthly representative. All the same, it only ever points towards your god; it is never the god itself. However, if you break this link, then your god and the figure cease to have this (signifying) connection. The statue becomes the object of worship in its own right, bestowing favour, punishing and what have you. The image that represents god becomes god itself, for the signifying link has been broken. Here lies the same threefold distinction that I traced in Marx's own treatment of fetishism a little earlier (in Part One): he takes the three terms—human being, object, and god (that is, beliefs about the object)—and then turns them over, looks at them from different angles and sees new possibilities.

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<sup>41</sup> There is more than enough evidence to suggest that an earlier polytheism was gradually overlaid in the texts of the Hebrew Bible by monotheism. Thus, the various references to the veneration and worship of multiple gods become in light of this late overlay myriad examples of waywardness and apostasy.

*Marx, Idols and Fetishes*

This threefold distinction is by no means the only thread that ties Marx's arguments concerning fetishism in with the critique of idolatry. Let us see what else turns up. First, it is difficult to avoid the polemical and mocking focus on everyday material items and the puncturing of lofty theological claims. Second, this product of human hands is attributed with all manner of superhuman attributes, especially since it is made in human form and with human beauty. Third, this process may be described as one of transferral, offering the idol/fetish the best of human properties (creativity, knowledge, love, social relations) and receiving from that object its own properties (a dead, thing-like existence). Fourth, this transferral has an implied negative, for the idol/fetish is a diminution of human beings and an elevation of non-human objects. In sum, what is good for the idol, at least before all those theological accretions that would come in the history of Christianity, is good for the fetish.

For many years I have been struck by the connection between this biblical critique of idolatry and Marx's various uses of the motif of the fetish, but I never suspected it would be so consistent and remain so close. From the moment de Brosses subsumed the idolatry of the Hebrew Bible in his treatment of fetishism, it was a constant backdrop to Marx's various reuses of the idea of fetishism. And it reappeared in some of the last material Marx wrote, *The Ethnological Notebooks*. Yet did Marx actually read texts like Isaiah, giving him the opportunity to make the direct connection, instead of passing through works like those of de Brosses and Lubbock? In fact, he did. In a little known note in Marx's Leaving Certificate from the Friedrich Wilhelm University the following appears:

V. In the summer term 1839

1. Isaiah with Herr Licentiate Bauer, attended.<sup>42</sup>

Marx's teacher was Bruno Bauer, at the time a licentiate in theology who became for a time a close friend and collaborator of Marx. Now Bauer was one of the leading biblical scholars and Young Hegelians of his day, soon to lose his post at Berlin for his radical positions. But in that summer they worked together through the book of Isaiah, a major prophetic book of the Bible, slightly before Marx read de Brosses's work on fetishism. From what appears in his writings on fetishism, it more than likely that he read passages like Isaiah 44.

All the same, despite the connections between this biblical critique of idolatry and the theory of fetishism—even of the former was subsumed by the latter—there is one issue on which Marx goes beyond the biblical text. In that text the effort to debunk the belief of the idol-worshipper—that this object directs one to God—seeks to show how ordinary the idol really is. After all, it is merely a piece of wood, metal, or stone, for there is no god to whom it points. By contrast, by the time he is writing *Capital*

<sup>42</sup> 'Leaving Certificate from Berlin University', *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1926]), p. 704.

Marx argues that the powers invested in the fetish are very real, for they alienate and diminish human beings. It is as though the one who made the idol in the first place was right in some respect, for the object does have power, but a pernicious and destructive power. In other words, Marx emphasises another dimension of the picture, the one in which the worker who makes the idol is worn out through hunger, thirst, and failing strength—except that now he gives it a whole new meaning.

### *Liberation Theology and Idolatry*

A word on liberation theology is in order. Among these theologians, as well as in the Marxist-Christian dialogue of the 1960s and 1970s, the connection between the critique of idolatry and Marx's development of the idea of fetishism has been explored to some extent.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on a relatively limited range of Marx's texts, especially the comments concerning the fetishism of commodities in *Capital* as well as his observations concerning all the dimensions of capital as 'this religion of everyday life',<sup>44</sup> these theologians argue that the idol—capital—is not merely a false god but that it devours its worshippers. Capital as a whole is idolatrous: its many parts, such as the foreign debt, gross domestic product, current account balance and growth, are all parts of a destructive cult that worships these idols as gods. And the economic theories that explain, justify and support these idols are false theologies which demand endless sacrifices. They are both false gods that demand blood and destroy their worshippers.

There is great value in these arguments, for they go a long way to developing a theological critique of capitalism. Yet I have one or two misgivings. To begin with, these treatments seek to subsume fetishism back within the orbit of the theological category of idolatry, failing to note that Marx's own use of fetishism moves in the reverse direction. One reason for such a reversal is that these theologians tend to rely on the well-known texts by Marx on fetishism, without a detailed examination of the

<sup>43</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004 [1982]), pp. 57, 146, 65–67; Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004 [1985]), pp. 59, 99; Enrique Dussell, *Las Metáforas Teológicas De Marx* (Estella (Navarra): Editorial Verbo Divino, 1993); Enrique Dussell, 'From Ethics and Community', in David Jobling, Tina Pippin and Ronald Schleifer (eds), *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 298–299; Jung Mo Sung, *Desire, Market, and Religion* (London: SCM, 2007); Franz J. Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death: A Theological Critique of Capitalism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986); Hugo Assmann and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *A Idolatria Do Mercado* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1989); Peter Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 75–109; Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 56–57; C. Stephen Evans, 'Redeemed Man: The Vision Which Gave Rise to Marxism', *Christian Scholar's Review*, 13:2 (1984), pp. 146–148; Richard Lischer, 'The Lutheran Shape of Marxian Evil', *Religion in Life*, 42:4 (1973), pp. 554–555; Max Josef Suda, 'The Critique of Religion in Karl Marx's Capital', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 15:1 (1978), pp. 15–28; Ronald F. Thiemann, 'Praxis: The Practical Atheism of Karl Marx', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 22:3 (1985), pp. 544–549. See my extended engagement with liberation theologies (note the plural) in Roland Boer, *Criticism of Theology: On Marxism and Theology III* (Leiden: Brill, in press).

<sup>44</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, op. cit., p. 817; Marx, *Das Kapital, Dritter Band*, op. cit., p. 838.

idea of fetishism in Marx's work (only then does the richness of the idea become clear).

More significantly, a consistent feature of liberation theology is to develop a beneficial or good type of theology that holds off from criticising the Bible itself, or at least a certain interpretation of the Bible, as a destructive force. They seek to denounce capitalism from the perspective of theology and the Bible while rarely asking whether the criticism may be directed back at their own base. After all, one can find myriad texts in the Bible which support the generation of wealth, encourage and justify ruling classes, and by no means make them uncomfortable. Yet the Bible is not to be tampered with, for it is contested terrain and liberation theologians need to claim what is in their opinion its deepest message—one of liberation—from their theological opponents. This problem leads onto the next, for the critique of capitalism as idolatry operates on the assumption that there is one true God and that the god or gods worshipped by the acolytes of capitalism are not real.

A return to Marx reveals some difficulties with such a position. Marx offers an insightful comparison between theologians and bourgeois economists: for theology, all the other gods are in fact superstitions, except ours. Everyone else may think they are worshipping a god, argue the theologians, but they are really worshipping a wooden object. It is just that they can't see it, for they are deluded. So also with the bourgeois economists: all that has gone before is mistaken, unable to see the truth. Capitalist relations, in which commodity relations are real and in which the forces of production are in control, finally reveal the truth in comparison to these earlier forms of social production. What they don't realise is that their own theory is just as contrived, artificial and delusory as the ones that have gone before. In other words, their own system is just as idolatrous as all the others.

Now there is a theological kick in Marx's argument, although I need to reverse its emphasis in order to be on the receiving end. He uses the analogy with theology to show how the bourgeois economists are deluded about their own theories. However, if we turn the analogy around, then the point is that the logic one uses to dismiss the truth claims about other religions is an extremely tricky one, for it may also apply to one's own. This point becomes clearer in a footnote, where Marx quotes from his own *Poverty of Philosophy*:

Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God.<sup>45</sup>

What interests me about this critique is the way it intersects with the risky critique of idolatry in the Hebrew Bible. Once one begins the process of breaking the

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<sup>45</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 92, n. 1; Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 96, n. 33.

signifying link between a representation—an idol—of the gods of others, there is no reason to stop reasoning in the same manner when it comes to one's own beliefs. Indeed, this is the reason, I would suggest, for the ban on images in the second of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). This commandment is not so much a concern with replacing Yahweh with some object or other. Rather, it seeks to negate the possibility of such a signifying link in the first place. Without an image, there is no connection between an earthly image and a divinity in the heavens. And if there is no signifying link, it cannot be broken; no one can decide to sever the signifying chain. It is, if you like, a manifestation of a fear that the process will continue inexorably. Once you have denied the existence of all the other gods bar one, then it is but one step further to deny the existence of the last one standing.<sup>46</sup> So, what you do is close down the mechanism by which this might happen: without a signifying connection between image and god, there is no possibility of breaking the connection and ending up with a pure idol. The difficulty of maintaining this ban shows up again and again in the histories of Judaism and Christianity. A word (God's name), a sacred text, a mediator, a saviour, a pope, a church, or a privileged position like that of liberation theology—all of these may represent God in some way and thereby re-establish the signifying chain. It then becomes vulnerable once again to the critique of idolatry.

### Summary and Conclusion

I began in the first part by following the trail of the fetish from Marx's first encounter with the idea in the book by de Brosses to its final expansion to cover all of the projections and transferrals of capitalism as a whole. On the way Marx took up a specific idea and transformed it at each expansion, so that we found it in labour, the money-relation, the commodity-form and then every other shape it might take. Through all these twists and turns, the basic argument retained a remarkable consistency. In the second part I backtracked and searched for the links with the biblical critique of idolatry, through de Brosses's subsuming of idolatry within the category of fetishism, Marx's continued fascination with the connection in *The Ethnological Notebooks*, and then to the text of Isaiah, which Marx had studied with Bruno Bauer back in 1839. However, despite the deep similarity of the logic that lies behind both the critique of idolatry and the idea of fetishism, Marx took fetishism a step further in *Capital*, arguing that fetishism was both illusory and yet very real, for its effects are debilitating. In doing so Marx also throws back a question to the liberation theologians who have sought to re-appropriate fetishism into a theological critique of idolatry. Had he had a chance to reply to them he would have said, yes fine, but only if you apply the blowtorch to your own position as well.

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<sup>46</sup> Hence the perpetual assertion, such as: "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it, let him declare it and set it forth before me"" (Isaiah 44: 6–7a).