

Two concepts of the
fetish: donham's
application of marx's
concept of the
fetish ...



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In this essay I will compare two definitions of the Marxist conception of the fetish. First I will examine Marx's conception of the fetish by analyzing a passage from Capital. Then I will provide an analysis of Donham's use of Marx's concept in order to show the common and disparate elements of these conceptions. I will argue in this essay that the two concepts have a common underlying definition but do differ in two crucial aspects, which makes them incomparable. The first aspect is the meaning of the word attributed to the fetish Marx speaks of the fetishisation of the commodity, while Donham speaks of the fetishization of fertility, I found this to bear quite an impact in the way the concept of the fetish can be understood and analyzed.

The second aspect that differs in both definitions is the mechanism by which the fetish actualizes itself in the world. In this I will take recourse to Marx's explicit likening of the mechanisms of religion and the fetish which is lacking in Donham's explanation of the mechanisms of the fetish¹. In Capital Marx provides us with the following definition of the fetish: A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appear to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation, existing not between themselves but between the products of their labor. ..

. There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. " [McLellan 1977: 436] The fetish thus exists on the mistaken identification of the source of relations between men. In reality relationships between men stem from the mode of production.

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The fetishisation of a commodity is a process by which men invert the relationship between themselves and their own products. Men produce commodities but these commodities seem to produce the relationships between men. This is a mistaken view. Commodities are perceived as having some inherent defining powers as to dictate the way men should interrelate to each other. This kind of perception of the commodity is possible only in the capitalist system. This is because the working process is fragmented into many procedures performed by different people and as such no one worker can identify with his product.

It is in fact the worker that produces the product but is alienated from it in the process of production [McLellan 1977: 437]. . It is important to note that Marx in other passages gives a slightly different definition² of the fetish – basically saying that fetishism is the belief that commodities have value in the same sense as they have weight and color. A source for the fetishization of the commodity thus lies within the way the commodity is exchanged and presented in a capitalist society. A commodity is exchanged for money giving it a special inherent property the actual product does not have materially.

People tend to believe that the value of a commodity is an inherent property of that commodity (like weight or color) while in fact all value is derived from the labor invested into the product by the producer. A commodity does have use value as one of its inherent properties, as we exchange it also receives exchange value which is determined by the amount of labor socially necessary to produce a commodity under the normal conditions of production [McLellan 1977: 424]. It is thus people who give value to the <https://assignbuster.com/two-concepts-of-the-fetish-donhams-application-of-marxs-concept-of-the-fetish-essay/>

commodity but in the process of fetishization of the commodity this original relationship is forgotten. For the purpose of a comparison with Donham it is essential that we acknowledge the emphasis on the mode of production in Marx's conception of the fetish.

As we can see fetishism of the commodity comes into existence in a particular mode of production this is the capitalist mode of production. These definitions are more static in identifying the fetish as being perceived within the commodity. The central fact underlying all definitions³ is that in commodity-producing societies there is a tendency to overlook the implicitly relational character of certain monadic predicates [Elster 1987: 96]. In the next section Marx goes on to elaborate his concept of commodity fetishism saying: " In order, therefore to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloping 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 the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. [McLellan 1977: 436] I believe this passage to be crucial as it opens up another door in understanding the fetish. Marx informs us that the fetish is rooted in the superstructure just like religion. This allows us to place the fetish among ideology and thus furthers our understanding of how the fetish is conditioned by the mode of production. This is important since it, again, implies the immense importance of the mode of production in the making of the fetish.

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Also interesting is the fact that in this passage Marx gives recourse to Feuerbach's criticism of religion. In religion as in commodity fetishism there is the phenomenon of inversion. This is a system by which real subjects are turned into the predicates of their predicates. This is in fact the fundamental mechanism for the formation of ideologies [Elster 1987: 477]. Marx sees this same phenomenon in the production of commodities: " as in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production he is governed by the products of his own hand. " [McLellan 1977: 441].

The common theme of fetishism and religion is therefore that in both cases man becomes the slave of his own product [Elster 1987: 479]. Now we turn to Donham's definition of the fetish. Donham first explains his reading of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism as: " It is hardly an illusion that capital investments make workers' labor more productive. What is illusory is the discourse that abstract machines from the labor process to speak of " productivity" of capital of " money making money. " Capital, of course, produces nothing; in itself, it is only the product of past workers' labors. The only human element, the only active component of the production process, is labor.

But this reality is inverted in social discourse, and capital seems to take on a life of its own. Ironically, the thing that men and women created with their own powers appears not as a result, a created thing, but as something endowed with creative powers of its own - powers that subsequently dominate men and women. " [1999: 103] From this passage we can see that

Donham basically concentrates on the more static definition provided by

Marx, where Marx is emphasizing the belief in the existence of some
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inherent powers (value, the ability of money to make money) as existing within the commodity. He goes on to explain the central difference of this concept in Maale society saying that " In Maale things were not invested with an aura of creative power but persons, living and dead, in certain social relationships" [1999: 104]. It is in this sense that Donham's definition of the fetish is in accordance with the underlying definition of the fetish as identified above⁴. Since people who have nothing to do with the actual production of specific crop and with actual biological reproduction are seen as indeed having a central role in this kind of production⁵.

But then he gives out a new way of seeing how a crucial aspect in a non-capitalist society is fetishized by redefining the concept of the fetish saying: " Maale discourse was dominated, in a phrase, by a fetishization of fertility. Whereas in reality the success of men and women in accumulating wealth and bearing children depended on their own productive and procreative powers ... " [1999: 104]. Here we can already see a discrepancy in the two possible definitions of the fetish provided by Donham, in the Marxian definition there is the fetishization of commodities while in Maale there is the fetishization of fertility.

The actual commodity is certainly a material thing existing out there in the world but we cannot say that the same of fertility. For fertility is not seen in actuality in the world but by its consequences (children, crops), fertility thus is a far more complex concept than the commodity. It is not out there in the world but is rather a secondary property deduced from the real objects in the world. This makes the parallels and divergences between Marx and Donham far more complex than it might have seemed at the onset. The basis of <https://assignbuster.com/two-concepts-of-the-fetish-donhams-application-of-marxs-concept-of-the-fetish-essay/>

Marx's approach is that in fact any analysis of a society must be conducted on strictly material grounds on grounds of properties empirically observable in the world, so this does not by itself exclude fertility but we must agree that the concept is already bears a way of understanding fertility - how do we measure fertility is culturally grounded.

Donham goes on to tell us that " the way labor was organized in Maale made it appear as if that success depended on other people's fertility ...As it turns out, this appearance is the key to a number of Maale concepts - from ownership to gender filiation. " [1999: 104].

Here we thus see that Donham uses the concept of fertility fetishism as a basic entry point into understanding and analyzing the Maale society. At this point it is not yet quite clear whether he believes the fetishism to be the grounds upon which the whole of Maale social organization is based upon. Such a claim would seem to contradict the basic tenets of Marx's approach to analyzing societies. But Donham goes on to explain: " In relation to the king and chiefs, fertility fetishism was grounded in the ordering of Maale horticulture and hunting. " [1999: 104] This is a point that we must take note of since Donham is explicitly stating his commitment to the Marxist approach claiming that the fetish in Maale is actually grounded in their mode of production.

He goes on to explain how the mode of production is related to the various institutions in Maale that finally produce the fetish: " The conceptual scheme behind [the Maale mode of production] ... onditioned the very notion of " ownership" of things and, indeed, the concept of " persons" who did the

owning. " [1999: 105] Here we thus see the fundamental structure of Maale's formation of the fetish, stemming from the modes of production come an interrelated conception of personhood and ownership. The connection between ownership and the fetish is established through the notion of parenthood: " One of the principal ways of referring to possession .

.. was with the notion of parenthood. ...

For it was the fertility and generative power of ... thers that was responsible, it seemed, for the property in the first place.

... The act of begetting carried with it, then, a notion of an inherent right to control. In this respect, fertility fetishism in Maale inverted commodity fetishism within capitalism: Instead of things apparently having power over people, people appeared to beget things. " [1999: 105] Thus the explanation is joined; in this part Donham produces the following structure in Maale construction of the fetish: To this we must also add some additional points.

First of all it is important to note that fertility can quite simply be replaced with two concepts parenthood or more specifically maleness. As we have seen the person giving life to a child (in Maale the man is associated with reproduction) is also its owner and the same is true of crops and objects - the owner of crops and objects is their father [Donham 1999: 106]. Because of the non-individualized conception of personhood a child and crop had numerous owners in degrees (scaling down the hierarchy from ritual king to chief to elder to father). But since parenthood can only be an attribute of men for as Donham tells us " Men were the cause of sexual and social generation. .

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.. To be a man was to generate. To be a woman was to reproduce but in a way that entirely depended on a man. " [1999: 106].

I would argue that in Donham's view the actual concept of parenthood (and thus of fertility) can be replaced by that of maleness, this is also probable since Donham tells us that in Maale "... there were not just two genders .

.. There was in fact a continuous gradation of maleness from the ritual king to the chiefs to subchiefs on down. ..

. In relation to the king, the chiefs were more " female"" [1999: 112]. This seems important since Donham identifies the central fetish in Maale as the fetish of fertility we might interpret it as a fetish of maleness, which can perhaps help us in understanding further the intricate details separating Donham's and Marx's idea of the fetish. If the fetish is thus understood as a fetishization of maleness we have not come any closer to the meaning bestowed upon the commodity.

Maleness is probably even more a specifically cultural concept and unmistakably belongs to the sphere of the superstructure. It is quite interesting to note that Donham actually refers to the fetish as to the base of a system of ideas - he says: " It was, in fact, in households that the primary process of fetishization took place, primarily in the sense that it produced the low note, the reverberating base [emphasis added] for the system of ideas being discussed ... " [1999: 106].

This is particularly important because it shows the change of emphasis in Donham; Marx put emphasis on the modes of production which give rise to

material entities like commodities which in fact jointly facilitate the production of a fetish. With Donham the mode of production is mentioned, and even though we are provided with a substantial amount of information about the mode of production the productive forces, the relations of production and means of production, he does not develop a clear connection between the mode of production and the ways in which it aids to develop a system of ownership and personhood. He focuses on the fetish as his main point of entry and even calls it the base from which other Maale conceptions can be understood. This seems as something that Marx never did, he has tried to explain ideas from the actual material base. He never posed one grand idea (that of the fetish) as stemming from the mode of production and then deduced all further ideas from an ideological base (which to Marx would probably be a contradiction in terms). This discrepancy as we have seen is caused by the difference in the meanings of commodity fetishism and fertility (or maleness) fetishism⁶.

The final way of seeing the discrepancy between the two definitions of the fetish is in comparing the mechanisms of religion to both concepts. As we have seen above, in Marx's way of describing the functioning of the fetish we can easily liken it to the mechanism of religion - to both the following definition applies: it is a system by which real subjects are turned into the predicates of their predicates [Elster 1987: 477]. This however cannot be applied to Donham's explanation of the mechanism of the fetish since by giving other people the credits for procreation and production of goods in no way implies that the real subjects are turned into the predicates of their predicates. The ancestors and hierarchical elders are in no way predicates of

real subjects as they are as real as the actual people producing crop and children⁷. It is also impossible to relate the common result of the fetish and religion to Donham's understanding of the fetish.

As we have seen above religion and fetishism have the effect of men becoming slaves to their own products. This does not happen in Maale as the elders are in no way the products of the people subordinated to them. It is in these particular aspects that we can see the fundamental difference between Marx's and Donham's understanding of the fetish - they ascribe to it a different mechanism which in turn produce quite different consequences. Because there are some fundamental differences in defining the fetish and its mechanism the two concepts become incomparable. I believe this can also be seen in the construction of the two figures above, since they seem to be structured differently. We can see in figure one that all concepts included in the explanation of the emanation of the fetish strictly belong to the material base, while most concepts used by Donham actually belong to the ideological plane or the superstructure.

We can also see that while Marx gives most emphasis on relations of production and social relations among men in general in his explanation these aspects (though central also to Donham) are lacking in figure 2. In figure 2 a prominent position is given to fertility - a culturally perceived concept - which interconnects all other aspects of Donham's explanation, such a prominent position is not given to a single element in figure 1. Marx however gives the main emphasis on the mode of production, which is the base of all relations in figure 1, this emphasis of the base is confirmed in figure 2 only formally, as we have seen the main points of relations actually

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do not stem from the mode of production but from the concept of fertility. The two figures thus have very little structural similarity indicating that the two concepts of the fetish are quite incomparable. Even though Donham's definition of the fetish seems incomparable to that provided by Marx it does bare an important consequence. It gives light to the problem of applying Marx's concepts to a non-capitalist society.

We must concur that Marx spent fairly little time trying to do that, which bears the consequence of a need for a certain amount of redefinitions in his basic conceptions. Whether Donham's redefinition goes to far from the original idea provided by Marx is certainly a subject for discussion, yet it is without doubt that Donham does this consciously thus forcing us to rethink Marx's concepts of the relations between the base and superstructure and the ways these can be applied to non-capitalist societies.