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The Dialectical Powers of the Fetish

Various types of scholarship have skirted around the topic of fetishism in Western Marxism. Those who have approached fetishism from the perspective of ‘ideology’ portray a continuity between Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism and Western Marxist’s use of the concept. Works on Western Marxism, on the other hand, ignore the idea of fetishism to focus on different points of rupture between Classical Marxism and Western Marxism. While both of these strands take differing points of view on issues of continuity between Marxism and Western Marxism, by skirting around a sophisticated analysis of the concept of fetishism, both strands effectively end up sharing an unsophisticated and inadequate analysis of the issue of fetishism in Western Marxism. My work hopes to remedy this situation by focusing on the theoretical development of fetishism from Marx to the second generation of Western Marxists.

I begin with an exegesis on the purported source of Western Marxism’s conceptualization of fetishism: Marx’s section on the Fetish-character of Commodities, which I argue is different from its popular conception as an illusion of ideological false consciousness and subsequently not the basis for the Western Marxist conception of fetishism. In moving to examine Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness*, I argue that it is in fact Lukacs who is the basis for the majority of Western Marxist’s conceptualization of fetishism in terms of its qualities, its theoretical centrality and its pervasive extensiveness. I then move to compare fetishism in two of the major second generation Western Marxists: Theodor W Adorno and Henri Lefebvre. Here I argue that although Adorno and Lefebvre’s theories of fetishism share remarkable similarities-- some unrecognized theoretical differences between Adorno and Lefebvre’s ideas of fetishism exist which account for their respective differences on the question of politics. I close by considering how my analysis has disclosed several different models of fetishism and move to criticize each types usefulness for political, social and cultural criticism.