Review

William Pietz: The problem of the fetish

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This volume is a collection of articles by the legendary critical thinker and cultural historian, William Pietz, whose name stands and falls today with his contributions to the theory and history of fetishism. A student of Hayden White and James Clifford in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California in the 1980s, Pietz is known for having devoted much of his intellectual energies to understanding the etymological origins, cultural metamorphosis, economic functions and political hermeneutics of the notion of fetish from the late Middle Ages until the beginning of the twentieth century in a vast human geography (West Africa, Europe and the Americas). The book brings together Pietz's previously published articles from the journal *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* (Chaps. 1–3, 6–7) and the 1993 essay collection *Fetishism and Cultural Discourse* (co-edited by Pietz himself; Chap. 5). The new material that finally sees the light of day with this volume is the fourth chapter ('Charles de Brosses and the Theory of Fetishism'), originally written as a follow-up ('IIIb') to his article series 'The Problem of the Fetish, I-IIIa'.

Fetishism is standardly defined either as a deliberate or involuntary subordination of an individual to an overwhelmingly powerful, materialized object that is capable of imprisoning human mind by blocking its supersensible faculties. The dazzling glitter of fetish objects is invariably expressive of, and aims to evoke, sensuous desires. They figure as the medium of supernatural qualities that are projected into animate or inanimate entities. They serve the purpose of establishing a relationship of exchange with superior powers, a contract which the fetishist holds accountable for sustaining an economy of gifts and sacrifices.

Far from treating the phenomenon of fetishism in a rigid, static and reified fashion, Pietz traces out the historical origins of the term by exploring its interculturally relative and temporally fluid roots in various transcontinental spheres. Initially, fetishism came out of cross-cultural encounters of semi-feudal Portuguese merchant capitalism and non-Islamicized African pre-capitalism, notably in Senegal, Benin and Gambia in the fifteenth century, an occasion of

trade that brought into contact two radically different systems of social values, religious beliefs and economic practices. Pietz is interested not so much in how the strange newcomers were perceived by the native Africans, but in how the Europeans began to define their cultural other. It was this early modern situation of Afro-European commerce that ascribed a special semantic function to the late medieval Portuguese word 'feitiço'. While the term was deployed by the Europeans as a dismissive template to condemn what they considered irrationality, social disorder, moral corruption and unenlightened religiosity of the Africans, Pietz argues that it provides significant insights into the constituents of the European selfhood rather than its assumed 'uncivilized' other.

In his conceptual history, Pietz delineates the etymological trajectory of the term from the Latin 'facticius' to the Portuguese 'feitiçaria' and 'feitiço' to the pidgin word 'fetisso' up until the French writer Charles de Brosses' coinage of the term 'fétichisme' in the eighteenth century. The term concerns not simply transcultural but also intracontinental religious, political and social issues, as much of what came to be known as the framework of fetish and fetishism was largely informed by the early European quarrels around idolatry in monotheistic and polytheistic contexts.

'Feitiçaria' (witchcraft practice) stemmed from 'facticius', meaning manufactured and artificial rather than naturally formed, or produced in a unique manner, or simply factitious and fraudulent in contradistinction to genuine and authentic. In the Christian theological discourse, 'facticius' was deployed to refer to idolatry in the sense of either sinful alteration of human body into a divine image or illegitimate sacralization of various objects. In its full development, idolatrous practices could take on forms of worship of false gods or invocation of and communication with demonic spirits. It was this understanding of idolatry that informed the condemnation of what was considered to be 'fetish' worship proper to witchcraft and superstition in the late fourteenth century Portuguese jurisdictional context.

When the Portuguese sailors first reached the Senegal River in the fifteenth century and encountered the Black African societies in Guinea, they defined the native religions as idolatry. This epithet was accompanied by the pair of 'idolo' (freestanding statues that represent spiritual entities) and 'feitiçio' (objects worn about the body that embody spiritual powers). While idols referred specifically to images as medium through which human soul and demonic spirits could converse, fetishes were understood to be personifications of material objects that could affect individual fortune. 'Fetissos' posed not only an interpretive but also a commercial problem for the European merchants. For they did not simply appear as commodities of trade but also as religiously desired and socially sacralized objects of exchange. Relatedly, economic interactions in the area invariably involved quasi-religious ceremonies of oath between trading partners.

Europeans interpreted such imposed obligations as irrational rituals alien to their own traditional economic practices. On Pietz's view, the puzzling mix of cultural,

religious and commercial codes, occasionally joined by aesthetic-erotic sentiments, prompted redefinitions of the European selfhood. Intellectual 'perversions' that they believed to have found in the 'inferior' mentality of the 'infantile' Africans figured in the later Enlightenment discourse of rationality as a foil for the sublime 'superiority' of the European 'civilization'.

This gradually unfolding ideology is perhaps best revealed, according to Pietz, in the Dutch merchant Willem Bosman's early eighteenth century account of Black African fetish practices. In addition to the previously established European prejudices toward African 'superstitions', 'magic' and 'witchcraft' that were believed to have corrupted human reason, Bosman's imagery of Africa suggested a deep moral and religious degeneracy within the African social (dis)order. Bosman argued that much of what was viewed as sacred by the local population genuinely stemmed from a naïve self-deception of those who were manipulated and exploited by the priests, the political elite who skillfully monopolized and manufactured religious truth. One could not explain otherwise, Bosman assumed, as to why African fetishists would arbitrarily attribute subjective purposes and meaningful intentions to aleatorily chosen objects of worship.

Pietz points out that we owe the term 'fetishism' to de Brosses' 1760 book *On the Cult of Fetish Gods, or Parallel of the Ancient Religion of Egypt with the Present-Day Religion of Black Africa*. The originality of de Brosses is to have offered a theory that was intended to compete with David Hume's account of the historical origin of religions. Polytheism, according to Hume, as the first historical form of religion mistakenly attributed divine and personal powers to natural objects and was typically motivated by superstitious fear. De Brosses, by contrast, asserted that fetishism predated polytheism, even if it shared most of the characteristics that Hume ascribed to polytheism. But unlike Hume's polytheism, de Brosses' fetishism posited that material objects themselves were endowed with visible and divine powers. De Brosses constrained his catalogue of fetish objects to terrestrial material objects and ruled out both Sabianic cults of worship (the sun and stars) and figurist interpretations of ancient religions as allegories and symbols of Christian mysteries.

Fetishism gained a new valence in Marx's deployment of the term when he came across de Brosses' work in 1842, applying it primarily rhetorically to attack political miseries of his time. Marx, early and late, frequently appealed to the language of fetishist magic in characterizing political, social and economic affairs, though he fell short of questioning the plausibility and reliability of the term as it was coined by the European merchants and Enlightenment ideologues. In response to both the twentieth century attempts to fully erase the term from the anthropological and sociological vocabulary and the (post-)structuralist and post-Marxist reinterpretations and occasional trivializations of the term, Pietz puts considerable effort into rehabilitating Marx's theory of fetishism by returning to the dialectical materialist origins of Marx's conception of capitalist societies and relatedly rescue the theory of fetishism from a fetishism of theory.

Pietz's materialist alternative avoids reducing the phenomenon of fetishism to mere false consciousness. He proposes instead to situate it in its cross-cultural transactional context that gave birth to its specific semantic connotation as part of the Afro-European pidgin trade language. One must also take into account, Pietz argues, that the conceptions of fetish and fetishism were never fixed once and for all but subject to historical change. Crucially, such a change happened in the nineteenth century British colonization of West Africa when the British began to identify African fetishes with the practice of human sacrifice and relatedly categorize it as a criminal offense. What was ideologically interpreted as a 'barbarian cruelty' of the Africans became a material obstacle for the political-economic ambitions of the empire in reshaping its colonial rule and intercontinental trade.

This book makes a major case for the importance of 'politics of interpretation' as a culturally hybrid, historically dynamic and ideologically disposed ingredient of 'interpretation of politics'. Overall a remarkable contribution to the anthropological, ethnographical and political literature, Pietz's volume will hopefully encourage the current readership to further work on fetishism and pave the way for a 'IIIc', 'IIId', 'IIIe' *ad infinitum* of 'the Problem of the Fetish'.

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