



**J. Lorand Matory.** *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. ISBN electronic: 978-1-4780-0243-7

In his groundbreaking work, *The Fetish Revisited*, J. Lorand Matory revisits Europe's theoretical discourse of the "fetish" from an until now absent locus of enunciation: the perspective of African religions. If some of the most influential figures in modern Western thought, such as G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, deployed the symbol of the African fetish as "the universal counterexample of proper reasoning, commerce, governance, and sexuality," Matory exposes the racial and colonialist bases of such arguments by offering a proper ontological articulation of such "spirited things" that Black people make (xvi–xix). "Contrary to Marx's demeaning metaphor and his assumption that the so-called fetishist is blind to the source of the fetish's value," Matory argues, "Afro-Atlantic priests typically know that it is people who make gods" (xix). In this sense, Matory overturns the colonialist gaze by putting European thought and African spiritual traditions on a level playing field, where both could be understood as the "articulation and materialization of a contested proposal about how such social relationships should work" (xviii). Through such an original framing, the European social theories that have been built on a colonialist misinterpretation end up being just as "material and as materially interested as the phenomena that they describe as 'fetishism,'" all while "African spirited things are as filled with thoughtful and socially positioned ideas as are European social theories" (15). This comparative reading structures the whole of Matory's valuable intervention.

*The Fetish Revisited* is accordingly divided into three parts: Part I traces the Afro-Atlantic sources of Marx's work, particularly as seen in Marx's theories of value and commodity fetishism. For Matory, the noticeable lack of engagement with actually existing slavery in Marx's work is the result of a rhetorical move that is more fetishistic than any displacement of value and agency seen in Afro-Atlantic religions (53). Such a rhetorical move refers to the metaphorization of the European bourgeoisie as "enslaved" victims of capitalism, which takes place after a "displacement of pathos and agency from literal slaves" in Europe's colonies (61). Such a move exemplifies what Matory refers to as an "ethnological *schadenfreude*" rooted in Marx's own personal "racial and class ambiguity" as a "downwardly mobile petit bourgeois and an off-white European" aspiring for social inclusion in the European symbolic order (79).

Part II focuses on the historically and culturally specific character of Freud's psychoanalysis, especially as it concerns the development of the movement as

a pseudo-scientific practice (125). According to Matory, just as Marx's theories of value and commodity fetishism, Freud's own theories of sexuality perform a similar "ethnological *schadenfreude*" displacement, seeking to validate the social standing of central European Jewish men by deflecting the critique of sexual deviancy onto "black and brown people" (130). To this end, this section closes with two pertinent subsections: (1) an overview of the *Zeitgeist* of Freud's time, where more culturally egalitarian approaches to the study of Black people (such as Herder's or Malinowski's) raise the stakes as to why Freud's own theories continued to build on racist colonialist tropes; and (2) an analysis of the "spirited" material things that shaped the "actor-network" brotherhood of psychoanalysis, such as rings, couches, and cigars. In these sharp and often humorous analyses, Matory makes psychoanalysts look a whole lot like the so-called "fetishists" that the Europeans vehemently disparaged to validate their own practice.

Part III focuses on conceptions of value and agency in Afro-Atlantic religions. Essentially, this section provides many elements that have been missing in the Eurocentric discourse of fetishism. Chapters 7 and 8, for instance, offer lengthy and erudite descriptions of how the material aspects of Afro-Atlantic religions (the composition of the things that become spirited, for example, pots, beads, stones, etc.) reflect the multidimensional ontology or philosophical anthropology behind these traditions. It is through these meticulous interpretations that Matory reveals how most Afro-Atlantic priests understand very well that *it is people who make gods*, fully debunking the Eurocentric assumption of fetish discourse presupposed by both Marx and Freud and the great majority of European social theorists. Based on almost four decades of ethnographic fieldwork, Matory theorizes that in these traditions, "the gods' power, their will, and their presence in their physical vessels are of a piece with the conscious choice of the worshipper to enact and uphold the reality of the god" (242). Gods and people thus, to a certain extent, make each other "reciprocally" (251), which is to say, the gods exist in the form of a *relationship* with us (259). The Eurocentric critique of fetishism at the foundation of crucial concepts in Marxism and psychoanalysis must therefore be eschewed in contemporary efforts to redeploy or revitalize these theories, so as to do the work of interpretation and analysis without such colonialist biases.

In the book's Conclusion, Matory reaffirms a central claim of the book: that what makes a fetish a fetish "is not its falsity," but the "context of intercultural, interclass, intergender, or interpersonal controversy and contestation that leads some people to call the thing a fetish (in Hegel's, Marx's, or Freud's sense), while other people call it a true god, a true spirit, a true repository of

value or agency, or an authentic metonym of some real force that matters” (31). This point, in my view, is ultimately a Foucauldian one, critical of “regimes of truth.” The aim Matory’s archaeology of the fetish is not to make an ontological claim to the accuracy of a certain interpretation of the world, whether historical materialist, psychoanalytic, or Afro-Atlantic religious. The point is to study the tensions and conflicts between, say, Marx’s and Freud’s value codes and that of their ignored Afro-Atlantic interlocutors (294). At this, there is no doubt that *The Fetish Revisited* is a revolutionary contribution.

*The Fetish Revisited* is a truly innovative and ambitious text. For a philosophical audience, its heavy dose of lengthy ethnographic research may be difficult to parse through, perhaps even appearing tedious and repetitive at times. At almost four hundred pages, it would not be hard to imagine splitting the manuscript into two distinct volumes: one volume for the succinct critique of Eurocentric theory from the position of Afro-Atlantic religions, and another volume that continues in more depth the scrupulous ethnography of Afro-Atlantic materialities. Of course, such a ploy would thwart what is perhaps the largest strength of this book: to compel readers of Marx and Freud actually to immerse themselves in what these canonical authors purposely ignored. Another aspect that remained undeveloped concerns the relation between Foucauldian “archaeology” and the “actor-network theory” of Bruno Latour. Given that Matory aligns his argument with both theoretical approaches, it would have been stimulating to see Matory’s critical gaze turn inward to them as well, to see if something is hiding underneath.

The confrontation staged in *The Fetish Revisited* is meant neither to delegitimize the European classics of social theory, nor to recenter the Afro-Atlantic perspective (315). It is instead a “value-neutral comparison” that establishes a “mutually respectful and reciprocally enlightening conversation among the inhabitants of culturally divergent worlds” (43). In this sense, I argue that *The Fetish Revisited* has a great deal to contribute to the ongoing decolonization of comparative methodologies, especially in the field of comparative philosophy. While an exemplary case of cultural anthropology, the rich interdisciplinarity of *The Fetish Revisited* offers comparative philosophers an illustration of how to put into question our very own inherited categorical frameworks of thought against the grain of the coloniality of knowledge. Indeed, Matory’s consummate act is to make us aware that our contestations over rivaling conceptual frameworks to make sense of the world is the stuff of *fetishization*.

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