***Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*. Hartmut Böhme. Trans. Anna Galt. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014. Pp. 431 (cloth).**

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Hartmut Böhme takes the concept of fetishism as a pivotal topic for an analysis of modern culture and discourse in the West. The book is both ambitious and modest. It is ambitious in that it attempts a comprehensive survey of the historical use of the concept of fetishism throughout virtually all domains of modern discourse. Böhme strategically divides this field into three areas corresponding to Chapters II, III, and IV: religion, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. This schema is intended to facilitate the organization of a very broad topic, which spans from (at least) the Enlightenment to the present day, from religion to science, from economics to art—that is to say, virtually all domains of Western life over the last few centuries. The concept of fetishism as a modern invention and the defining category of modernity constitutes the connecting thread of Böhme's story. Issues and specific examples within the chapters frequently, and unsurprisingly, overlap. The task of surveying all of these fields in both premodern and modern times could never be fully realized in a single book, but Böhme manages to include so much material here that it would be churlish to quarrel with the absence from his compendium of particular authors, social aspects, or activities. The positive note worth making in this respect is the amount of material made available to any scholar interested in the broad matter of fetishism, for the bulk of this 431-page book is dedicated to the enumeration and exploration of a host of theoretical debates held in the West about the problematic relation between subject and object, person and thing, agent and patient, mind and body, reason and desire, and so on. Fetishism is located at the core of these oppositions, and this fetishism is two-sided: it is the idea that inanimate things have agency and that, conversely, humans are under the control of inanimate things. The concept is problematic and suspicious, but a pervasive one nonetheless. This alone is sufficient reason to justify the task of tackling the fate of the concept in modern discourse, and Böhme's book is a contribution in that direction.

A brief outline of the contents of *Fetishism and Culture* could be drawn as follows. After an Introduction of the subject and other minor considerations, Chapter I defines more clearly Böhme's theoretical position and presents the general case for the kind of analyses performed later on, with a lengthy discussion of phenomenology and, among other things, of Bruno Latour's work (this is actually the crux of this book, as we will see). Chapter II treats authors ranging from Thomas Aquinas to Aby Warburg, and the concept of fetishism is viewed in relation to the problems posed by "primitive" idolatry and magic, which Western Europeans first identified in non-European peoples and then in themselves. Chapter III discusses fetishism within Marxist discourse on the objectification of workers and the commodification of things, including a section on museums and private collections. Chapter IV investigates the use of fetishism in psychoanalytic and feminist discourse (grouped together as discourse on sex), ending with three brief examples of areas where the relation between fetishism and our bodies raises theoretical (and practical) problems: food, fashion, and cinema.

A final, yet not so complimentary, comment on the book considered as a survey must be made, for Böhme's ambitious comprehensiveness has its pitfalls. Some issues or areas the book addresses are tackled very unsatisfactorily in terms of depth. Cinema is a clear case here. There is such a copious amount of scholarly literature on film and the relation it has, for example, with psychoanalysis, that Böhme's meager treatment of the subject runs the serious risk of seeming to have been included merely for the sake of it. Given the topic, it is perplexing that cinema is treated so sparingly and that major authors go entirely unmentioned—one thinks immediately of Slavoj Žižek, who has written abundantly about film and, precisely, its relation to Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. I must be clear that this is not a complaint about what is absent from the book, but about the frail treatment of some of what is present.

There are also problems with Böhme's use of certain authors. He quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein three times, for example. The first quotation (p. 27, n. 7) is a remark which Böhme claims Wittgenstein uttered socially, and so which appears without a reference. Moreover, it completely misconstrues the Austrian philosopher as one who stands for some kind of enlightened positivism against "stupid anthropomorphism." The other two instances (pp. 48, 98) are taken from

the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—an early work against which Wittgenstein himself later argued and a treatise which, in any case, commentators still struggle to align with the rest of Wittgenstein's thinking. Yet Böhme takes a few remarks from the *Tractatus*, without concern for the rest of Wittgenstein's work, as the basis for an interpretation of his thought. These methodological problems are compounded by the odd choice of text. Why choose the *Tractatus* rather than the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, for example, which seems much more suited to Böhme's topic—not to mention the many other works which Wittgenstein wrote on culture, art, value, and our relation with things in general?

But none of the above constitutes sufficient reason for readers to ignore the central argument running through the book. This is the book's significant contribution, and it is also where Böhme matches his ambition with modesty. He is modest because, although the subtitle is "A Different *Theory* of Modernity" (my italics), he is quick to deflate the phrase as "a bit of a mouthful" (p. 15), and then expresses the wish to avoid "a macro-theory of fetishism and modernity" (p. 14). Still, his analyses come very close to producing precisely that, for Böhme's entire book is premised on certain all-encompassing assumptions about the concept of fetishism and about modernity, assumptions for which he then seeks evidence everywhere. In other words, the book's many laborious discussions of fetishism from the Enlightenment to the present day in the West, as useful as they may be, are justified and depend entirely on claims voiced at the outset such as this:

> From the perspective of this book, being modern is precisely not creating or upholding an opposition between reason and fetishism, but about developing a reason that allows the horseshoe to remain hanging [a horseshoe placed over a door for good luck being an example of a fetish]. Being modern means living with oneself in contradiction, without having to reconcile the contradiction. A modern culture deserving of that name would consist of a differentiated view of both rationalism and self-reflection, and would not merely tolerate fetishistic practices, but develop them too. (p. 14)

Besides presenting, in effect, a general view of modernity and of the status of the fetish within it, the problem here is that these claims are never substantiated.

Instead they remain unexamined opinions, and problematically so, since they function as the theoretical premise for the entire book.

It is helpful to clarify in detail the core difficulty at stake here by returning to the subtitle and considering the word "Different." If we ask what Böhme's theory is *different* from, and how, the short answer is: Bruno Latour's concept of fetishism and of the attendant opposites which dominate Western discourse (subject and object, person and thing, etc.). The presence of Latour in Böhme's book is crucial. Böhme's lengthy diagnoses of the historical use of the concept of fetishism within modern discourse repeat Latour's diagnoses of the same matter, but because Böhme wishes to arrive at a different theory, Latour becomes his main opponent. Overt signs of hostility are displayed when Böhme calls Latour's position a "formula" (p. 50) and his books "manifestos" (p. 64). Despite this, Böhme agrees with Latour that

> The historical paths through the history of interpretations of fetishism in religious studies and ethnology, in economics and cultural studies, in sexology, psychoanalysis and feminism, have shown that fetishism has consistently been understood as an "opponent" […]. This proved to be one of modernity's typical strategies for dealing with what was considered "premodern"; a strategy that in fact prolonged or even produced the phenomena it was fighting in the first place. […] On all levels, again and again we saw that the fetishism we wanted to keep "outside" […] is from the first to the last a powerful force "inside" modern Europe itself. (p. 387)

Latour advanced identical claims long ago, a fact which we can see crystallized in one of his titles: *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Latour has consistently defended the idea that the iconoclastic violence with which enlightened societies have attacked whatever has been considered a form of fetishism represents merely a symptom of the same iconophilia from the fetishist is said to suffer. The only difference between the iconoclast and the iconophile is in the particular artifacts chosen to be destroyed or worshipped. According to Latour, modernity elected a positivist idea of science for the role of ultimate vocabulary and mode of understanding, in the hope that knowledge and reason, not appearance and irrationality, would finally be secured. But this idea of scientific understanding

is, for Latour, just the new sacred product of our own doing. It is, therefore, identical to the objects which non-European peoples produced in order to worship as gods, since scientific theories are partly (at the very least) products of our own making. Finally, the promise of rationality and knowledge is rejected by practical reality itself, for the enlightened man did not stop being enchanted by things, natural or artifactual.

In this same spirit, Böhme makes the argument that "[n]othing seems more wrong than the assertion that the world has been disenchanted" (p. 9), and this means that there is a severe contradiction in modernity: the very same age that gave birth to the positivist idea of science is the age, Böhme continues, of mass media and mass consumption, of cult forms "in politics, in sport, in film" (p. 9), and so on, as never before. This contradiction has created a tension, Böhme claims,

> which forces everyone to decide to be either on the side of the subject (then all knowledge is "fabricated," constructivism) or on the side of the object (then everything is by nature a fact, realism); or to be on both sides simultaneously. (p. 65)

Apparently, Böhme and Latour share the same views. The disagreement only emerges when it comes to the conclusions they want to reach, and this explains Böhme's hostility towards Latour's arguments. The latter wishes to say that, although fetishism has been a pivotal part of our discourse for the last few centuries, it is senseless and should be thrown away. Latour's solution is to say that each pair of opposites with which we are used to work and which substantiate the concept of fetishism (agent-patient, mind-body, etc.) constitute a unitary whole, not pairs of different things. Thus, he proposes a novel way of thinking based on a new category he calls "the factish."[1] This means that nothing is just a subject or just an object; everything is a composite hybrid, a third single entity. There are, therefore, no contradictions, no opposites. This is a strong and ambitious move, and Böhme is very aware of it: "All this leads to the conclusion that the concept of fetishism should be taken out of circulation altogether." And

[1] Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

yet Böhme rejects this conclusion: "The semantic sprawl and rampant disorder of the concept will not be remedied by burying it. The fetish would simply return as a ghost" (p. 17).

This is an unconvincing argument and it is where the core of *Fetishism and Culture* faces a severe difficulty. The problem is not that the book offers a survey of modern discourse without a full-fledged theory, as Böhme modestly says at one point. The problem, or the difficulty, is that the survey of modern discourse and the analyses of all of those areas of culture is premised on the unsubstantiated assumption that it is *still* important to speak of idolatry, irrationality, the unconscious—in sum, the fetish. In other words, Böhme thinks that, in contradistinction to Latour, fetishism is not only a concept invented and exchanged within theoretical debates, *it is also a practical reality*. His book, then, is not simply a survey of how modernity has been speaking about culture using the invented idea of fetishism; his book is the attempt to show how we are fetishists *in fact*. Thus, Böhme concludes:

> The history of the last two centuries of science shows that the sciences failed to understand the phenomenon of fetishism. […] when the fetishism that is projected outwards is recognized as something that is "part of us," we can bury the hatchet and end the critical campaign against it. […] The end of the denunciation of fetishism coincided with fetishism itself becoming ubiquitous in modern society, no longer banished to the cellar where it was permitted to make its subcultural, shadow world. (p. 387)

Böhme's solution for coping with the seeming existence of fetishism in virtually all contemporary human affairs is to suggest that we stop talking about it in a negative way *because we are all fetishists*. The awkwardness of this argument should be made clear, for it is analogous to the idea that we should stop talking negatively about, say, lying because everybody lies—at least at some point in our lives. This kind of reasoning inverts truth by making ethics subordinate to practice, as well as the world subordinate to discourse. To repeat an earlier quotation, Böhme wants us to "not merely tolerate fetishistic practices, but develop them too" (p. 14).

There is a postmodern tone to this argument. In modernity, Böhme claims, we finally saw that fetishism was in us as well. *Now* there is a new situation in which fetishism is present, we know it is present, and we no longer feel troubled by its presence in our midst. Böhme tries to argue for this set of assumptions by piling up so-called evidences: his survey of areas, cases, examples. But the book offers no good reason for justifying the soundness of the concept of fetishism in the first place. In fact, it actually questions that soundness by exposing fetishism as a modern invention. Nor does the book offer a valid criterion for what counts as fetishistic and what does not. Böhme assumes that the available discourses on fetishism are valid or true accounts of contemporary human affairs. He offers no way for us to recognize when is a cigar only a cigar. He seems poised, in fact, always to take cigars as something else.

To sum up, Böhme and Latour agree that Westerners and the exotic others whom they project are alike. For Latour, this means that nobody can be said to be rational or irrational; these terms are inadequate for *there is no neutral position from which to measure who is what*. Böhme, however, wants to interpret the likeness between Westerners and their others this way: *we too are irrational*, just like them. Böhme *has* a theory after all, one for which he has no grounds. Fortunately, a theory or idea is not true just because it has been formulated. In other words, the fact that modernity invented the concept of fetishism does not mean that we are, in fact, fetishists. The entire survey Böhme offers in *Fetishism and Culture* is sound only to the extent that it shows the reader how fetishism has pervaded the intellectual imagination for centuries, and apparently still does. The existence of such a discourse, however, is not evidence of its claims.

Of course, Latour might be wrong. But the evaluation of the kind of position Böhme sustains is independent of this, and the reader should approach this book with an open mind about the possibility that we might be fetishists after all. What we then need to know is exactly how or why this would be the case. Sadly, Böhme's book sheds no light on the matter. In fact, *Fetishism and Culture* perpetuates the very same frame of mind under which enlightened Europeans arbitrarily condemned what was exotic, abnormal, or unusual in relation to them, for that is precisely the kind of assumption that leads Böhme to suppose that such a wide array of relations and practices *must be* manifestations of fetishism. The possibility does not seem to occur to him that, for instance, such relations

are merely symbolic, or that such practices are just expressions of a tradition. Most people will not bet their life savings on the casino just because they have hung horseshoes, and when we kiss the pictures we carry around of our children, we do not mistake them for our children's actual cheeks. To do this implies no sleep of reason.