

Chapter Seven

Idols

It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things.¹

Capitalist production first develops the conditions of the labour process on a large scale . . . but developing them as powers which dominate the *individual worker* and are *alien* to him. Thus capital becomes a very mysterious being.²

In our third foray, fetishism comes to the fore as Marxism and theology continue to rub up against one another, at times intimately and at others fractiously. Let me state my basic argument at the outset, which seeks to flush out the underlying connections between fetishism and idolatry.³ By focusing on fetishism rather than idolatry, Marx and then Adorno brought about a shift: instead of the signifying link between idol and god characteristic of the critique of idolatry, Marx and Adorno focused on the transferring relation between object produced and the human being who produced it. The rest of the chapter will unpack this way of

1. Marx 1894a, p. 817; Marx 1894b, p. 838.

2. Marx 1861–3, p. 459.

3. Marx's interactions with fetishism are diverse and fecund, generating various types of critical response. I have produced three overlapping but also distinct reflections, of which the following is the second in a series. Each has their own rhetorical integrity, each their own flaws and, I would hope, insights. For the other two readings, please consult Boer 2012, pp. 177–206; 2011a. The latter piece focuses on Marx's elaboration of fetishism in the second and third volumes of *Capital*, where he speaks of '*Kapitalfetisch*'.

describing Marx's approach to fetishism, but I do need to clarify the terms I use before going any further.

By *critique of idolatry*, I refer primarily to the polemic found in some biblical texts, although it may also include the more elaborate theological category of idolatry in the later tradition. *Fetish* is a term that was first used by the Portuguese when they encountered African social and religious practices on the West-African coast in the fifteenth century. They preferred *fetisso*, since 'idol' did not capture the nature of the amulets, small objects and even food items used by the Africans. Subsequently, 'fetish' became an overarching category for analysing supposedly earlier stages of religion among 'primitives'. By *signifying link* I refer to the relation between the object and the deity or superhuman power to which it refers. The critiques of idolatry sought to break that link, arguing that no god exists and that the worshipper – stupidly – serves a mere object of wood, stone, metal, or perhaps animal or human. So, as a recognisable shorthand I will call the signifying connection and the effort to break it the *idol link*. Finally, the *transferring relation* is different: it takes place between human beings and the products of their labour. In Marx's hands, fetishism tends to deal with the transferring relation, or what I prefer to call the *fetish transfer*, for he wished to find out why there seems to be a transfer of powers between a range of elements within capitalism – commodity, money, value, capitalist, profit, wealth and so on – and the human beings who produce those elements. The theory of fetishism provided him with an answer – a mutual transfer of powers between human beings (who lost out) and the products of their labour – that would later gain philosophical rigour with Georg Lukács's elaboration of reification: the tendency in capitalism for living relations to become thing-like while things themselves seem to have life breathed into them. Let me be clear: that is not how Marx (or, as we will see a little later, Adorno) describes the process. Instead, it is my own take on what is going on behind the scenes, for I am interested in the theological implications of Marx's breakthrough, especially in terms of the way idol and fetish interact.

I have already provided an outline of my argument for the first half of this chapter, where I explore the way Marx brings about a shift from the signifying link characteristic of idolatry to the transferring relation of the fetish, or from the idol link to the fetish transfer. I also trace the way Marx reshaped the idea of the fetish to deal with the alienation of labour, money, commodities and eventually every facet of capitalist economic activity, so much so that capitalism itself becomes the religion of everyday life. In the process, Marx also assumed that fetishism, which was originally a term conceived to bypass the perceived shortcomings of a theologically overloaded idolatry, subsumed idolatry within itself. There idolatry acts like an agent under cover, opening up a covert exchange between Marx's thought and theology.