

# Fetishism and the problem of disavowal

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Fetishism has been often linked to misrecognition and false belief, to one being “ideologically duped” so to speak. But could we think that fetishism may be precisely the very opposite? The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of this at first sight counterintuitive notion. It locates the problem of fetishism at the crux of the problem of disavowal and argues that one needs to distinguish between a disavowal – marked by cynical knowledge – and fetishistic disavowal, which can be understood as a subcategory of the same belief structure of ideology.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This conceptual paper is based on literature review and utilizes examples from the author’s ethnographic fieldworks in India (2008-2013) and central Europe (2015-2019).

**Findings** – The paper provides a new insight into the structure of fetishism, relying on the psychoanalytic structure of disavowal, where all disavowal is ideological, but not all disavowal is fetishistic, thereby positing a crucial, often unacknowledged distinction. Where disavowal follows the structure “I know quite well how things are, but still [ . . . ]” fetishistic disavowal follows the formula: “I don’t only know how things are, but also how they appear to me, and nonetheless [ . . . ]”

**Originality/value** – The paper develops an original conceptualization of fetishism by distinguishing ideological disavowal from fetishistic disavowal.

**Keywords** Ideology, Disavowal, Fetishistic disavowal

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

A quote from Mitchell’s article “What do Pictures Want?” may serve us as a starting point for our thinking about fetishism and its relation to disavowal. In its introductory part, Mitchell offers the following statement to the reader as a defense against a potential accusation against him fetishizing images:

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To save time, I want to begin with the assumption that we are capable of suspending our disbelief in the very premises of the question, ‘What do pictures want?’ I’m well aware that this is a bizarre, perhaps even objectionable question. I’m aware that it involves a subjectivizing of images, a dubious personification of inanimate objects, that it flirts with a regressive, superstitious attitude toward images, one that if taken seriously would return us to practices like totemism, fetishism, idolatry, and animism. These are practices that most modern, enlightened people regard with suspicion as primitive or childish in their traditional forms (the worship of material objects; the [. . .] treating of inanimate objects like dolls as if they were alive) and as pathological symptoms in their modern manifestations (fetishism, either of commodities or of neurotic perversion) [. . .] Nevertheless, I want to proceed as if the question were worth asking [. . .]. (Mitchell, 1996, p. 71).

Two remarkable things occur in this paragraph. First, we can sense the need of the author to defend himself against a charge not yet levied against him, a defense against someone who may not even exist, but who could have believed that the author himself is a fetishist, and hence the psychoanalytic formula of disavowal, “I know quite well, but still” (the question is worth asking) (Mannoni, 2003), structures his introductory paragraphs. Second, we can sense that fetishism, posited alongside other “primitive” takes on the world, must be something terribly undesirable belonging to traditional societies – even if, later in the same article, we learn that most of us are still fetishists in this sense, personifying objects and so on. Before we move to the problem of disavowal, let us first consider several points, without aiming at an exhaustive literature review, in regard to how fetishism and fetishists have been constructed in opposition to the civilized.

Modern societies have often imagined that it was precisely their lack of fetishistic thinking that distinguished them as civilized and modern. Their members perceived themselves as superior rational beings directly opposed to those they saw as inferior, primitive, superstitious, delusional, perverse and irrational magical thinkers. The fetishist, a character placed on the stage of theory in 1760 by Charles de Brosses (Leonard, 2016; de Brosses, 1760), was said to believe in the inscrutable power of random material objects and their agency; the fetishist was the primitive *par excellence*, someone not yet capable of sublimation. James G. Frazer’s classic, *The Golden Bough*, may be seen as a paradigmatic example of this line of thought (Frazer, 1894). To Frazer, fetish was not more than a piece of superstitious magic belonging to the crudest savages, who knew neither religion nor science. Or else, *the savages were said to not know better*. This anthropological notion of fetishism was connected to an evolutionary idea of stages of social and religious development that placed fetishism in between atheism and totemism, as the origin of religious thought (Lubbock, 1870; Comte, 1858).

However, already early on, the notion of fetishism became controversial. Max Müller condemned it in 1892 as pseudo-scientific and even argued that a belief in fetishism is itself an extraordinary superstition (Böhme, 2014). Müller even claimed that it was an “insult to human intellect” to be:

[. . .] asked to believe that anytime in the history of the world a human being could have been so dull as not to be able to distinguish between inanimate and animate beings, a distinction in which even the higher animals hardly ever go wrong. (Müller, 1986, p. 73)

In 1906, Alfred C. Haddon, too, complained that the notion of fetishism was being so overused that it was effectively becoming meaningless (Haddon, 1906). Bronislaw Malinowski altogether dismissed the notion that such a superstitious being ever really existed and instead pointed his finger at the function this imaginary foolish Other has for us: this “superstitious, mystical [. . .] ‘pre-logical’ being” is “good copy and pleasant reading – it makes us feel really civilised and superior – but it is not true to facts” (Malinowski, 1962, p. 260). Despite these critiques, the concept of fetishism gained foothold in new theoretical

territories. And it also made a career shift: from having been used to “understand” (or distance ourselves from) the otherness of the other to being used to understand the otherness of ourselves (Böhme, 2014), or the primitivism within our own culture – the very aim of Marx’s own usage of the notion of fetishism (Žižek, 1997) or for that matter Mitchell’s above. Fetishism has thus become a popular instrument of critique, a charge that could be raised against something undesirable, such as “primitivism among the civilized.” Fetishism is thus also imagined to capture our corrupt and perverse relation to objects, our turning away from the truth (Layton, 2010). This legacy of negativity has dominated popular readings of Freud (fetishism and perversion) and Marx (commodity fetishism, mystification and alienation). The aim of this article is to question this reading of fetishism as a mere foolish misrepresentation, also often a shibboleth for being duped by ideology, and to locate fetishism more precisely within a larger theory of ideology, as its one structural instance or manifestation, but precisely the one where a double awareness of one’s subjectivation emerges, and thus one marked by an excess of knowledge rather than its lack – but precisely because of this maybe doubly powerful, but certainly not naïve. This line of thinking is inspired by the works of the cultural theorist and psychoanalyst Pfaller (2005, 2011, 2014, 2017), as well as Mannoni (2003), Althusser (2008) and Žižek (1997, 1989).

#### *Rejecting fetishism as a simple misrecognition*

Ever since its appearance on the academic scene, be it in anthropology, sociology, political economy, philosophy or psychology, the notion of fetish and fetishism has been perceived with ambivalence and even embarrassment. Fetishism threatened to be all too general, and thus empty, but at the same time, its ever-stretching explanatory power remained enticing (Pietz, 1985). Today, we are left with a plethora of its utilizations across disciplines, but it is the anthropological, Marxist and psychoanalytic readings that remain the most influential and that expanded the scope of fetishism from religion to sex and economy (Ellen, 1988), whereas later theorists applied the concept to popular culture, celebrity stardom, consumption, neoliberalism and so on (Graeber, 2001, 2005; Taussig, 2010; Layton, 2010; Baudrillard, 1996). Although, for instance, for Freud, fetish could have been such a specific thing as the shine on the nose (Freud, 1927), for contemporary theorists like Tim Dant “fetishism can refer to the relative quality of desire and fascination for an object” (Dant, 1996, p. 513) and “the fetish quality of cars, works of art, mobile phones, shirts and Italian food is [...] assigned through cultural mediation, the circulation of signs that include the objects themselves. It is realised through a worshipful consumption of the objects in which reverence is displayed through desire for and enthusiastic use of the object’s capacities” (Dant, 1996, p. 514). Although surely consumer items confer social value and status, and cultural fantasies created by advertising, popular culture or politics stimulate consumption and desire, we have to ask if fascination with fast cars, desire for an iPad and our occasional worshipful attitude toward them is enough to talk about fetishism. Does the use of fetishism contribute to any conceptual work here or is it just a redundant label or merely a notion used to subtly pass a moral judgement about “the silly fetishists who fall for all these consumer fantasies?”

The aim of this article is not to rehearse in detail the history of the concept across these disciplines, which has already been done elsewhere (Sansi, 2015; Pietz, 1985, 1996; Ellen, 1988; Bass, 2015; Böhme, 2014), but rather to unsettle the common pattern of thought in respect to fetishism that has taken hold across qualitative social sciences – from anthropology to sociology and consumer research – and that have often been perpetuating and cultivating a particular misconception in their theorization of fetishism: *namely a*

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*misconception that fetishism is grounded misconception, error, false consciousness or misrecognition.* If there is one thing that these diverse approaches to fetishism tend to share, it is precisely this notion, and as such it may be worth exploring if it in itself cannot be a misconception. We are all familiar with the negative idea of mystification or misapprehension, which appears in different forms in readings of the anthropological, Marxist and psychoanalytical notions of the fetish. The problem many appear to have with mystification is that it leads to objectification and alienation, as in the process we are said to forget our own authorship of the world and thus become susceptible to vicious manipulation and so on. But we must ask: If this is the only possible way to understand ideological mystification or for that matter the anthropological notion of fetishism linked to false belief?

Even a cursory reading of cross-disciplinary texts on fetishism reveals that the notion of fetishism is still trapped in its original meaning. Namely, as de Brosses conceived of it, as a pure condition of un-enlightenment distinguished by the “fetish worshipper’s desire-driven delusion regarding natural objects” (Pietz, 1996, p. 136). Marx’s famous notion of commodity fetishism has been, too, time and again interpreted as a misconception about the origin of value, as an instance of collective forgetting, repression and as a matter of vulgar ideological distortion. In Tim Dant’s work, we find an example of such an interpretation:

In the work of Marx and Freud the term “fetishism” is used to identify misunderstanding of the world in which properties are attributed to objects that can only correctly be attributed to human beings. The use of the term allows them to connect these misunderstandings to a pre-humanistic scheme in which spirits, sometimes residing within material objects, were treated as a significant part of the ontological order of the world. [...] To identify a fetish is to expose the inadequate beliefs of those who revere it *for they believe* it is capable of, by pointing to the real, material, qualities of the object and identifying its presumed capacities as really residing elsewhere – in the “true” god; in human labour; in arousal by a person of the opposite sex [...]. To use the term ‘fetish’ in a realist mode is to engage in cultural critique; it is to identify someone else’s reality as an illusion, an unreality. (Dant, 1996, p. 496)

Pietz similarly writes, interpreting Marx, that

[...] the human truth of capital is that, as a means that has become an end, it is a socially constructed, culturally real power-object: it is the instrumentalized power of command over concrete humans in the form of control over their labor activity through investment decisions. Capital is a form of rule, of social government. It is this political truth that the chiasmic personification-reification structure of capitalist fetishism conceals. (Pietz, 1996, p. 147, emphasis mine)

However, what we shall try to show here is that the structure of fetishism is not as straightforward as a simple delusion or concealment.

An example proves the point: The notion of fetishism as concealing, as an ideological cover-up that can be shattered into pieces by knowledge of the real relations, is precisely the same idea that drives consumer activists who aim at de-fetishizing commodities through truthful revelations, i.e. by revealing the true history of the commodity to restore a nonalienated relation between commodities and consumers (Duncombe, 2012). For the consumer activists, often self-proclaimed Marxists, as Duncombe documents, “the goal is to reveal the hidden, light the darkness, to make the social ills, usually invisible to the middle and upper classes, visible” (Duncombe, 2012, p. 361). Hence, “the political problem is identified as the one of ignorance and the role of the activist is to shine light on the darkness and reveal the true nature of things” (Duncombe, 2012, p. 362). The fact that the activists fail time and again at changing the actual behavior of consumers whom they repeatedly enlighten should already tell us that ignorance is not the actual problem here. After all, is

there really anyone who does not know that fast fashion is produced in exploitative conditions of sweat shops? The point that the activists miss here is that when it comes to ideology, lack of knowledge is typically not the problem (Pfaller, 2005, 2014); to the contrary, people tend to consume and enjoy products that are a result of exploitation etc., precisely against their better knowledge (Kuldova, 2016a). Moreover, this “revolutionary knowledge” becomes itself easily commodified (think *Adbusters*) and sold to those consumers who wish to display their enlightenment and moral superiority, thus becoming just another status symbol, as Heath and Potter nicely documented in their book on the commodification of counterculture, *The Rebel Sell* (Heath and Potter, 2005). Or as Mitchell argued, “the most obvious problem is that the critical exposure and demolition of the nefarious power of images is both easy and ineffectual” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 74). Cluley and Dunne similarly re-discovered this psychoanalytic structure of “I know quite well, but still [...]” developed by Mannoni (2003) – even if they do not refer to his seminal work – among the consumers they studied, i.e. a structure of acting *as if* one did not know, or else, against one’s better knowledge. They point out that:

[...] the average consumer already knows only all too well that their daily bread and clothing, as well as their privileged luxuries, are almost always made possible only by the existence of exploitative and unsafe working conditions that damage the social and physical environment. It is widely acknowledged, in other words, that a thriving consumer culture cannot but perpetuate environmental degradation and socio-political inequality – and yet – consumer culture marches on, triumphant. (Cluley and Dunne, 2012, p. 252)

Cluley and Dunne consequently developed a theory that suggested that what was at stake in the “acting as if they did not know” of the consumers was their inherent narcissism. However, psychoanalytically speaking, this *as if* structure would correspond rather to *disavowal* (Pfaller, 2014; Mannoni, 2003), knowledge being involved, rather than to the structure of narcissism – even if narcissistic fantasy may play a role in the structure of ideology (on the side of paranoia) and even in disavowal. Figure 1 can help us understand a crucial difference that often goes unacknowledged when discussing fetishism and ideology,

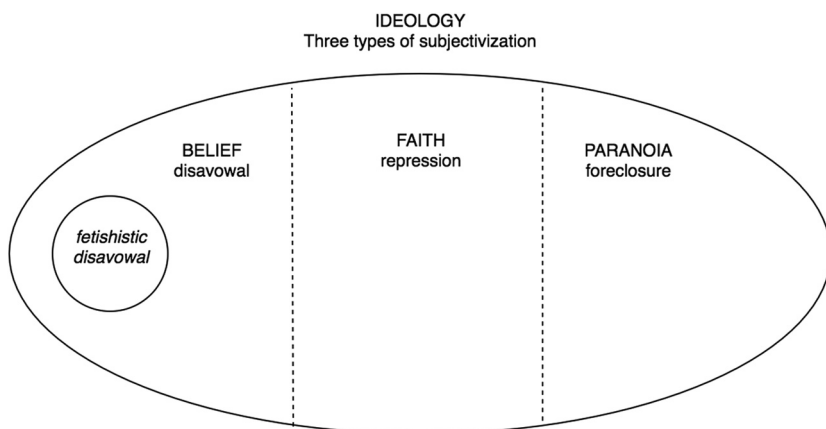


Figure 1.  
Three types of  
subjectivization

Diagram based on Mannoni (2003) and Pfaller (2011).

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or when ascribing such as the aforementioned authors the structure of disavowal to fetishism. Namely, that *all disavowal is ideological, but not all disavowal is fetishistic*.

But if we look more closely at Marx's iconic quote, we may spot the source of the mistake of the activist. Marx writes, "a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx, 1977, p. 163). What strikes us is the reversal of the well-established interpretation to which the consumer activists subscribe. Marx does not say that there is an illusion and we must demystify it, to reveal the truth of the relations of production and de-fetishize the commodity. To the contrary, the nature of the production of the commodity is out there in plain sight, directly perceivable by anybody. Instead, what is fascinating is that even though we know this so well, it still appears as a magical thing, or rather, we tend to treat it as such in our material practice (Althusser, 2008). This is precisely where the split between science/knowledge and ideology manifests: the two can easily co-exist, knowledge being unable to break with ideology [for a sustained account of this notion of ideology, see Althusser (1971) and Pfaller (2005)]. The structure of disavowal, of acting as if one did not know, is thus primarily ideological, one of the forms of subjectivation, but this still does not mean that it is necessarily fetishistic. Everything that is fetishistic is ideological, but not everything that is ideological is fetishistic.

The actions of the consumers who act as this thus fall rather within the realm of disavowal/ideology, but not necessarily within the realm of fetishism. This is also the reason why consumer activists who insist that a commodity appears to the deluded bourgeois subjects as a magical thing, but really it is an embodiment of reified social relations, fail in their attempt to fight ideology with knowledge. Moreover, we could also argue that the structure is precisely the reverse of what the consumer activist imagines, namely that the bourgeois subjects may think that the commodity appears to them as a simple embodiment of social relation, and the commodity really is that, but that is not how the commodity *really* appears to them. Žižek points out in this context that:

They know very well, how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relation to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy. (Žižek, 1989, pp. 29-30)

This is the key to understanding ideology in the form of disavowal, and what is crucial here is that "it is precisely our "subversive," "cynical" distance toward a certain ideology which subjects us to this ideology and allows it to exert its social efficiency" (Pfaller, 2005, p. 115). In my own work on current advertising strategies that aim at self-effacement, invisibility and subtle manipulation, I have shown how, paradoxically, the advertiser's failure to fool people into believing that they are not present, i.e. that no manipulation is taking place, is precisely their victory. It is "their failure to create "authentic," "genuine" or "real" spaces" that "makes their attempts at seduction effective" (Kuldova, 2016a, p. 15). Here, the cynical distance of consumers, their knowing better, is at work while they are happily consuming. In regard to this matter, it also must be emphasized that only rarely does ideology manifest itself through theoretical knowledge, more often than not it is embodied in our practices, everyday acts and social rituals (Althusser, 1971), something that may further ease the emergence of a cynical distance.

A similar split between a disavowed illusion and actual acts has been identified also within anthropological perspectives on fetishism. David Graeber, who sees this "double-think" as a form of (positive) social creativity, turning the usual negative fetishism into something positive tells us that:



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The word “fetish” is ordinarily invoked when people seem to talk one way and act another. The surprising thing is that this can happen in entirely contrary ways. In the case of the African objects that came to be labelled “fetishes” by European merchants and other travellers, those who employed them insisted that the objects were gods but acted as if they did not believe this (such gods could be created, or cast away, as needed). In the case of contemporary commodity fetishism, it’s quite the opposite: the average stockbroker will insist he does not really “believe” that pork bellies are doing this or securitized derivatives doing that—i.e., that these are just figures of speech. On the contrary, he *acts* as if he does believe they are doing these things. (Graeber, 2015, pp. 3-4)

Although this structure of disavowal is crucial to understanding ideology, and it is also indispensable for understanding fetishism, we must ask again: If this is so, what does then distinguish fetishism from an ideological fantasy or an unconscious illusion that structures the real?

*Fetishism and the problem of disavowal.* All influential notions of fetishism (anthropological, Marxist and psychoanalytic) pose the question of belief – of who really believes or if there is anyone at all who believes or ever believed. Robert Pfaller has in this respect shown that there are numerous “illusions without owners,” illusions in which nobody believes, disavowed illusions, that nonetheless structure our reality (Pfaller, 2014). The original anthropological narrative has been that back in the days there were indeed those fetishists who really believed in the agency of objects, and this is what made them the lower, inferior Other – at best a silly ancestor. And yet, even within anthropology itself, the idea of the Other who really believed did not go down too well and remained a tricky issue. In this respect, it is instructive to look into older writings; Haddon, for instance, cites in his *Magic and Fetishism* Ellis and Brinton remarking the following:

“Every native with whom I have conversed on the subject,” writes Ellis, “has laughed at the possibility of it being supposed that he could worship or offer sacrifice to some such object as a stone, which of itself it would be perfectly obvious to his senses was a stone only and nothing more.” So the Maori *wakapoko* were only thought to possess virtue or peculiar sanctity from the presence of the god they represented when dressed up for worship; at other times they were regarded only as bits of ordinary wood, and Brinton affirms that “nowhere in the world did man ever worship a stick or a stone as such.” (Haddon, 1906, p. 70)

Similarly, Malinowski does away with the notion of a silly fetishist, when he writes:

Surely here primitive man shows himself superstitious, as he also does in worshipping animals, plants, or totemic objects. And again, is it possible to have science side by side with all the magical hocus pocus and with the heathen worship of stick, stone, or beast? [...] Now here the most important thing to realise is that primitive man makes full use of his knowledge wherever he can. You must discard the notion that the savage is a child or a fool, a mystic or a nincompoo. (Malinowski, 1962, p. 259)

Ludwig Wittgenstein argued along similar lines that “Frazer’s account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes these views look like *errors* [...] it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all that out of sheer stupidity” (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 119, emphasis in original). After all:

The same savage, who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his arrows skilfully and not in effigy. (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 125)

Wittgenstein, too, touches upon the fact that knowledge of facts has little to do with ideology, when he writes that:

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[. . .] *no opinion* serves as the foundation for a religious symbol. And only an opinion can involve an error [. . .]. Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then feel satisfied. (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 123, emphasis in original)

In this respect, Wittgenstein clearly links illusions, conscious or not, to satisfaction, or else to cultural pleasure (Pfaller, 2014). If there ever has been a misrepresentation in respect to what has been labeled as fetishism, it has been that an "illusion without owners" has been mistaken by somebody else as someone's own illusion (Pfaller, 2014) – a temptation that is recurrent, to which the logic of the consumer activists testifies: much like the civilized used to cast the other as primitive, those who perceive themselves as morally enlightened cast today the consumer as an unenlightened shopaholic (equally in need of rescue). But one thing is clear, the problem here is certainly not a lack of knowledge.

To the contrary, Robert Pfaller has shown in his work that:

Knowledge is the condition for devotion to the illusion [. . .] without the knowledge that women do not have a phallus, there would be no fetish. In order to do away with the fetish, it does absolutely no good to confirm fetishists in their knowledge. (Pfaller, 2014, p. 41)

But what does then distinguish fetishistic disavowal?

If there is one thing about sexual fetishism, one of the most obvious, but by no way the only, forms of fetishism that strikes us at first sight is that people openly (albeit often secretly) admit to it. This became clear to me when conducting a brief ethnographic fieldwork among the BDSM community in Oslo in 2014. If we return to the example above, and the distinction between how things are and how they appear (i.e. the materialized ideology or ideological fantasy in action), we may claim that in the case of the fetishist, unlike in the case of the consumer, it is not the case that he simply cynically disavows the illusion and yet acts it out in practice (this does not mean that there are no consumer fetishists – again, whereas all car buyers may know well that cars pollute the environment and what not, and yet they purchase them, this does not necessarily translate into them being car fetishists; again, *all fetishism is ideological, but not all ideology is fetishistic*). The fetishist does not say, I know that it is just a pair of leather boots, but still I cannot help getting aroused by them. The fetishist goes a step further, he says: I know that this is just a simple pair of leather boots, but this is not how these boots really appear to me; to me they are a special object, which provides me with excitement and pleasure, and I treat them accordingly – polish them, exhibit them next to each other behind my vitrine, gaze at them, kiss them and so on; I treat them like a sacred object. The fetishists in the BDSM community were all particularly keen on showing me their collections of objects and invested a lot of time in kinky handicraft or figuring out alternative uses for commodities found in stores like IKEA, turning common goods into peculiar objects of arousal. In the process, it was not only too clear to them that they were the creators of the objects that then took possession of them (they did never forget that), but also they often discussed their actual material practice in relation to these objects at length with each other, thus collectively developing the "magical practices" in which they then indulged. In a telling encounter, one of the members of the BDSM club told me that it was precisely their investment in tools and material culture that separated men from beast and that distinguished the BDSM practitioners as civilized, superior and cultivated, in opposition to the boring "vanilla" people, who engage in sex without tools, like animals. It is precisely their acknowledgement of how objects really appear to them that distinguishes them from the cynical Other, who perceives himself as enlightened, because he knows better.



Fetishistic disavowal thus emerges where people know both how things appear and how they really appear to them, and they acknowledge that acting in accordance with how things really appear is a source of their pleasure, along with the magical techniques they develop in respect to their fetishes. Similarly, the so-called primitives, who know they practice magic, have magicians – a sign of their civilization rather than primitivism. From this perspective, we could claim the following: The problem of fetishism defined by misrecognition or misrepresentation, as we identified it earlier, is a problem of relation to these avowed fetishists. The avowed fetishists are often perceived by the “enlightened cynical Other” as true believers in the inherent magical power of their fetishes precisely because they admit to their fetishism. But what the fetishist acknowledges is not that objects are magical, but the way things *really appear* to him (unlike the cynics). Moreover, no less than the “enlightened cynical Other,” the fetishists also know very well that, for instance, those are just leather boots. Here the temptation to label the Other dismissively as a fetishist, in the old negative meaning, re-emerges along with the idea that the fetishist really believes in his fetish.

We must therefore be clear when distinguishing the structure of *disavowal* and the structure of fetishistic disavowal. The structure of *disavowal* pertains to an ideological fantasy or unconscious illusion and manifests itself in specific material practices, but is revealed as such only through a particular analysis and relies on the gap between what people proclaim to believe and what they actually do (for instance, treating specific consumer objects as fetishes) while insisting on their cynical distance toward such practice. On the other hand, in the structure of fetishistic disavowal, the self-proclaimed fetishists are not only aware of how things are, but also how they really appear to them. In the following, I will illustrate the distinction between the two by way of two examples drawn from my fieldworks, the first among high-end fashion designers and fashion consumers in India and the second from my fieldwork among the members of the outlaw biker subculture.

*Case 1: Disavowal in selling Indianness.* On February 14, 2016, Mumbai’s ITC Grand Central hosted the “Weaves of Banaras” fashion event, a part of the Prime Minister’s Narendra Modi “Make in India” campaign, where 12 prominent Indian fashion designers presented their creations. This was just the latest ritual event where Indianness was publically staged and materialized in the opulent neo-aristocratic designer creations, intended for the consumption of the elites and the wealthy, or else India’s top 10 per cent that owns 80.7 per cent of the country’s wealth (Chakravarty, 2016). Giving a material and aesthetic shape to an imagined Indianness, culture and to national belonging, has, in the last decade, become an obsessive preoccupation of leading Indian fashion designers (Kuldova, 2016c). Elsewhere, I have argued that this precisely fills the cosmopolitan elite’s lack (Kuldova, 2017), as one designer fittingly told me, “Our market is created by the lack, the void, by that which people desperately desire and want to be, but which they know they are not. [...] They come to us with the hope that we can fill this void and that we can transform them to what they believe they should be.” This sense of lack which they attempted to fill matched the pervasive obsession of my elite interlocutors with “being Indian at the core,” “at the heart.” To the elites, perceived by the majority of India’s population as westoxicated, morally corrupt and driven by pure self-interest, objectively staging their moral Indianness became even more important. In this case, we could argue that the desired commodity that embodies Indianness “not only serves to disavow a lack and assert a presence, but as well to incarnate a lack, to simultaneously veil and unveil an absence” (Gemerchak, 2004, p. 38). The elite’s lack of Indianness is filled by the elaborate hyper-traditional clothing, which both incarnates their lack and objectively makes them appear as moral traditionalists. However, while Gemerchak ascribes this function to fetish, I would rather insist that this filling of the lack follows rather the structure of disavowal at large than fetishistic disavowal in

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particular. This is even more visible in the following where the ideological is not necessarily also fetishistic and where the commodities serve ideological interpellation of the subjects in the first place.

During the last decade, top Indian designers have, coinciding with the rise of Hindu nationalism, abandoned aesthetic experimentation, westernized styles, futuristic modernism or artsy postmodernism, all in favor of creating an image of Indianness, commodifying heritage, traditional crafts, royal styles of the bygone eras, as well as myths of India's greatness. Indian fashion designers have also been actively commodifying the skill and creativity of Indian artisans, turning the mostly impoverished craftspeople themselves into an object of consumption as *the* source of "authentic Indianness" (considered as "authentic" largely because of their poverty). In the hands of the designers, the opulent, heavily embroidered and hand-woven clothing is purified through their ideological work, as they elevate it into the realm of design and, occasionally art, and remove all the pollution associated with the actual bodies of the craftspeople, leaving only the idea of cultural heritage, compressed into the garments.

But what is crucial in this process is not only the materialization of ideology and its compression into a few square inches of fabric, but also the way in which these garments transform their wearers and take possession of their bodies, making them act and feel in certain ways. Here the materiality of ideology and the fact that is often more present in ritual, acts and matter than in discourse comes precisely to the fore (Althusser, 2008). The designer garments are intended to materialize the megalomaniac visions of India's future superpowerdom, with all its cultural and moral superiority, as much as they are intended to adorn the elites, who increasingly see themselves as a neo-aristocracy (Kuldova, 2014). Elsewhere, I have documented different cases where female buyers, who considered themselves as emancipated elitist women, often wearing western clothes on a daily basis, purchased such designer garments for special occasions, and while wearing these garments, their behavior would immediately markedly transform: they would lower their gaze, lower their voice, taking the usual pose of traditional female modesty (Kuldova, 2016c, Kuldova, 2017). However, none of these women would admit to such a transformation or to the power of the designer commodity over them and would largely dismiss it as silly; to them, those were just designer clothes, a fancy status symbol but not more than that; at most they could transform them into beauties. Some would argue that we are dealing here with a fetishized commodity. But it is clear that the fancy garments are treated from a position of cynical distance by the consumer; they are not considered a fetish by the wearer and the wearer does not acknowledge how the commodity *really* appears to her.

Still, we could claim two things in this case:

- (1) The garment has a transformative power and thus makes the subject act, in her material practice, in accordance with the ruling nationalist and traditionalist ideology, and thus possesses an ideological quality.
- (2) The garment believes on behalf of the wearer, so that the wearer can internally feel relieved (and feel cosmopolitan and above nation), while objectively and materially demonstrating her commitment to Indianness and belief in tradition.

This second phenomenon of delegation of belief and enjoyment to an external object can be understood through the concept of "interpassivity," developed by Robert Pfaller (Pfaller, 2003). The designer garments that materialize the ideology of national pride and culture thus so to speak believe in the narrative of India's future superpowerdom on behalf of the wearer, who can then comfortably remain cynical, because internally she knows better (and yet she is still materially reproducing the ideology she rejects).

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*Case 2: Biker patches – fetishistic disavowal.* Outlaw motorcycle clubs are known for protecting their patches, by both legal means and violence, from copyright infringement and desecration (Kuldova, 2016b). Outlaw bikers, such as the iconic Hells Angels MC with their trademarked “death head,” openly consider the patches or logos they wear on their vests and tattoo on themselves as sacred. If one were to desecrate the logo, make fun of it, copy it or touch it inappropriately, one is up for trouble. I do not wish to go here into detail regarding the actual biker subculture, which I have described elsewhere (Kuldova, 2016b, 2018). Instead, I wish to focus on the relationship of the bikers to their sacred patches, which is instructive for our discussion of fetishism. The patch embodies the values of the bikers; it is the materialization of their brotherhood ideology, codes of honor and alternative legal structures. In a TV documentary, *Outlaw Bikers*, John Real, the former president of Hells Angels Maryland, captured the power of the patch in the following manner:

I was the talk of the town, one of the best guys, we were initiated as Hells Angels, best day of my life, as soon as I changed that patch I became this monster, from just the jacket I wore. I put that patch on and I paid the price. I eventually got arrested, I eventually got charged [...] I eventually lost almost everything I owned, because of that patch, but I would do that again tomorrow. (Winterhalder *et al.*, 2010)

The patch is not only an embodiment of the biker value system that serves the reproduction and expansion of the group, or just a desired brand in its own right, enhanced by pop-cultural mystique (think of *The Wild One* with Marlon Brando or *Sons of Anarchy*), but also collectively it can be seen as a totem of the respective biker clan. But on an individual level, for many it approximates more a fetish than a totem, even if collectively shared – it is tattooed on the skin, worn on the body, hanged around the neck, adorning almost every item worn, not to mention the motorcycles. (The interesting question here would also be: How is it that the same object becomes a fetish for different people, and possibly for different reasons, and can a subculture produce a fetish, which fills different lacks for its members, with the fetish being shared, the reasons for its fetishization being different?) The club insignia is a fetish in its own right, an object with a transformative power, an object that interpellates people into action, both collectively and individually. But unlike in the aforementioned case, the interpellation is widely recognized, celebrated and ritually reproduced. What Pietz described as:

The subjection of the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at a certain moments (Pietz, 1985, p. 10).

The patches demand certain actions from their wearers, from behaving like brothers to showing respect to each other and following the internal laws of the group. Much like in the above case of the garments that embody the ideology of Indian nationalism, the patched vests, too, are a materialization and reification of an ideology. By wearing these vests, the wearers objectively, materially, reproduce this ideology, irrespective of what they may think internally. So far, the structure is thus the same as the above, and we could still say that the power of the patch does not diminish against better knowledge, namely the fact that they know very well that in the end the patch is just a piece of fabric. Hence, we could still say that the patches are effective precisely because of this better knowledge (Pfaller, 2014). We should not believe that the outlaw bikers naively believe that a piece of cloth possesses almost magical powers, and yet we know that they are willing to fight, and even kill, if someone dares to desecrate their sacred patch – indeed, being an honor culture where appearances matter, there is little wonder (Kuldova, 2018). A recent incident that took place

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in Germany also shows us that they clearly know better: the football team SV Gremberg of the local division (Kreisliga C) was about to play against Leverkusen when it turned out that they are running around in "Support 81" T-shirts with the text "Red Army 81 Cologne supports Hells Angels." Leverkusen felt intimidated, and even scared, refusing to play at first; others claimed that it was a scandal to let Hells Angels commercially endorse a club. The response of the Hells Angels across the social media was: "Do these people believe that a piece of cloth, a T-shirt, can intimidate anyone, seriously?"

But here comes the twist. What distinguishes the case of the bikers' relation to their patches from the case of the female wearers of Indian garments, both reproducing a certain ideology through their material acts, is the fact that the bikers openly acknowledge how the patches *really* appear to them. They know perfectly well that the patch is both a piece of fabric and a sacred object that needs to be protected, venerated, fought for and that has the power to transform their behavior (how things really appear). *As a result, they openly admit to the fact that the patch really appears to them as a sacred object with magical properties and that they ritually treat it as such.* One of the reasons for this being so is that the patch is something reserved only to the members, it is an inalienable possession (Weiner, 1992), it cannot be bought and it cannot be sold. Hence, also the investment in the sacred logo and reverence for objects covered with it is far higher than when it comes to ordinary commodities. Although, for instance, the Harley-Davidson has been enormously successful in creating "brand communities" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and consumers venerating their iconic product, the fact that it can be sold and that these communities are *not* "greedy institutions" (Coser, 1974) with sacred symbols that take over the individual lives of their members and demand full commitment and loyalty (unlike outlaw biker clubs) also means that people at large are not willing to kill for the Harley-Davidson logo, even if there may be some who are real Harley-Davidson fetishists and display a fetishistic structure of disavowal. But by and large, Harley-Davidson riders are rather on the cynical side: they know well it is just a bike, but still they cannot help themselves. But ask them if they think the Harley is sacred or at least sacred to them and most will laugh the question off and say, "In the end it is just a bike, but I love it." Indeed, in the eyes of the cynical Other who maintains a distance between his/her beliefs and ideological practice, this fetishistic position of the acknowledgement of how things really appear on the part of the fetishist is equated with the idea that the fetishist really believes that the patches actually *are* like that and inherently possess agency and power. But this is not one and the same thing. The fetishist does not believe that the objects themselves have agency and are magical, he merely admits to the fact that this is how they really appear to him and he chooses to nurture this illusion and develop numerous cultural and ritual practices surrounding it. This explains why the self-proclaimed fetishist always appears in the eyes of the cynical or enlightened and civilized Other as the primitive and why fetishism has been equated with misrepresentation and false belief. It is no coincidence that outlaw bikers are often perceived by the mainstream as a lowly primitive subculture of symbol-minded people organized like tribes. This is also true for the split between regular Harley riders and outlaw bikers; the former perceive the latter as primitive, violent and barbarian, precisely because of what they view as their excessive attachment to club colors and honor, whereas the latter perceive the former precisely as wannabe bikers who really do not know what riding a Harley with brothers is all about, lacking the element of the sacred. And yet, if there is any ideological misrepresentation taking place, is it not precisely on the side of our first example? Is not the second position the more enlightened one? Do the fetishists here not recognize the fundamentally social nature of objects rather than believing in the object's internal qualities or spirit? But while fetishistic disavowal is based on a doubling of knowledge, rather than

ignorance, we should also consider that there may be something they don't know, namely: What is their fetish a substitute for? However, this would be a subject for further investigation and another paper.

### Conclusion

Having discussed the underlying tenets of existing theories of fetishism, we have argued that we need to abandon the notion that fetishism is to be located in a misrecognition, misapprehension or false belief. Instead, I have proposed to distinguish fetishistic disavowal as a special form of disavowal as one type of subjectivization or else ideology. This means that we should be more careful when using the notion of fetishism, and when applying it to certain phenomena, such as fetishization of commodities – which in this sense has more to do with ideology and disavowal than with fetishistic disavowal – even if there may be individuals who may be consumer fetishists (but again, not all consumers are consumer fetishists). Talking broadly about consumer fetishism is questionable not only because of its ambiguity, but also because it becomes unclear what the concept of fetishism adds to the analysis – that the concept of ideology has not already achieved. Moreover, in this usage, fetishism often becomes a shibboleth for an implicit moral critique (e.g. consumer culture and fetishism of commodities), and it often becomes something that we should overcome or rid ourselves of. In opposition to this notion, we have used the example of outlaw bikers and their relation to their sacred patches, to complicate the relation between belief, disavowal and the concept of the fetish. Identifying the split between how things are and how they really appear as central for understanding both the ideological fantasy, and fetishistic disavowal, as in the second case, we have argued that seen from this position, fetishism reveals itself precisely as the opposite of misrecognition and that it is only the cynical subject who perceives himself as enlightened that identifies the avowed fetishist, who recognizes both how things are and how they really appear, as a primitive trapped in a belief in the inherent magical properties of objects. But the fetishist himself does not and has never believed such a thing. This is a crucial insight that has slipped through the fingers of most of our theories enchanted with silly believers who misconstrue the nature of the world around them. This has made us feel enlightened, as Malinowski remarked, but now we must ask ourselves if it has not always been the fetishist, who was the truly enlightened.

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