

On Antonio Gramsci's hidden concept: Fetishism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc**Gianmarco Fifi** 

LSE, UK

Abstract

The article sheds light on Gramsci's use of the term fetishism. Despite not being as present and pervasive within the *Prison Notebooks* as other concepts, more deeply rooted in Gramscian scholarship (such as hegemony and historic bloc), fetishism is not as marginal in Gramsci's reflection as it is usually believed. Linking his understanding of the term to the one developed by Marx and by the later unorthodox Marxist scholarship, I shall argue that fetishism can be seen as a key component of Gramsci's theory of revolution or, better, of a theory of the failure of the revolutionary process. For this reason, the article will also link Gramsci's occasional reference to fetishism to his use of more developed concepts such as common sense, hegemony and passive revolution. Fetishistic views of reality, in Gramsci, appear as facilitating the conservation of the status quo, while the re-acquisition of individual and collective responsibility that comes along with de-fetishising practices is the necessary component of any revolutionary project.

Keywords

common sense, fetishism, Gramsci, hegemony, Marx, passive revolution

Introduction

Karl Marx (1990: 165) defined 'commodity fetishism' as a phenomenon in which, through the exchange of goods, the relations between individuals assume 'the fantastic form of a relation between things'. The pervasiveness of commodities production and consumption today makes this form of fetishism particularly widespread (Hudson & Hudson 2003: 413). Fetishism, however, exceeds the realm of commodity exchange, and it has entered the vocabulary of social scientists as defining all social phenomena that *appear to* possess constituent autonomous properties capable of constraining and structuring the actions of individuals (O'Kane 2013: 12). The process of globalisation and the

Corresponding author:

Gianmarco Fifi, LSE, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: g.fifi@lse.ac.uk

epochal changes faced by contemporary society increase the appearance of forms of fetishism and alienation that extends beyond (although being strictly connected to) the mere fetishism of production, namely that linked to all those events that accompany the powerlessness that people devoted to socioeconomic change face in their daily lives. It is sufficient to think about the apparent impotence of political parties, trade unions and social movements when confronted with issues such as recurrent economic crises, unemployment and poverty to get an idea of how little each individual can feel herself capable of contributing to tackle such problems.

For this reason, fetishism can be associated not only with the products of economic activities but more in general to all social forms. In this second sense of the term, fetishism has recently been employed by unorthodox Marxist traditions, understanding the critique of fetishism as ‘the central theme of *Capital*’ (Holloway 2010a: 109). As Vasillis Grollios (2017: 67) puts it, ‘fetishism is not a phenomenon that exists alongside other phenomena in the capitalist mode of production; rather, it forms the core element of the capitalist system’. Fetishism is not a simple appearance, in as much as it has real social consequences. Yet, what is at stake in Marx’s theory is the extent to which fetishism originates from causes that are beyond human control and activity, or if rather they are connected and subjected it. Can social forms make themselves independent; or is their autonomy only an appearance which veils the link with people’s decisions, activities and ideas? And, if so, in what sense can we say that what appears to us as a relation between things, is ultimately only a relation between human subjects? Marx understood the struggle against fetishism as implicitly involving the struggle against all social forms that can apparently frustrate the emancipation of labour (a key example being the state).¹ In this sense, struggling against fetishism means criticising, thus bringing ‘everything back to human doing and its organisation’ (Holloway 2010b: 110). The appearance of forces external to human activity is, in fact, such – an appearance that has its origins in the shortcomings of potentially opposing groups and that, exactly for this reason, can be contested and eventually subverted.

In this article, I come back to Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* in order to rediscover the value that such interpretation of fetishism has in the theoretical reflections of the Italian philosopher. Gramsci mentions fetishism only 13 times in the *Prison Notebooks*, and it would be unfair to consider this a central notion in the architecture of his *oeuvre*.² In those instances in which Gramsci refers to fetishism, however, he seems to elaborate a nuanced understanding of the term that aligns with Marx’s use. More importantly, the same theory of the failure of the revolutionary process is expressed (although not using the word ‘fetishism’) *ad abundantiam* in his prison’s writings (and explicated in his reflections on key concepts such as common sense, hegemony and passive revolution). As I will show, both in Gramsci and Marx the economic and political dimensions of fetishism are strictly connected: the former signalled the faultiness of understanding capital as an automated subject independent of human subjectivities that fuel it; the latter points out the relation between the seemingly extramundane continuity in the order of capital and the insufficient forms of praxis developed by the subalterns.³ I shall argue that fetishism is not invoked by Gramsci as a characterisation of an automatic subject (*das Kapital*), which would render mere appearances the human subjectivities that compose it and aliment it (for similar interpretations, see Arthur 2002; Bellofiore 2018). On

the contrary, it is only thanks to the fetishistic view of reality of the so-called subalterns that capital can appear as a self-constituting subject with its own logic. More concretely, fetishism results in the support to pre-conceived ideologies (which Gramsci often defines as ‘common sense’), excessive emphasis on structural constraints (‘mechanicism’) and the lack of conscious action (‘passivity’) from the subalterns. These attitudes facilitate elite-driven political changes (‘passive revolution’) and prevent the creation of cohesive alternatives to the status quo (thus resulting in a reinforcement of existing hegemonies). By uncovering these mechanisms, the article will argue that fetishistic views of reality are at the basis of Gramsci’s understanding of continuity, while the re-acquisition of individual and collective responsibility that comes along with de-fetishising practices represents the only possible ground to develop a truly revolutionary subject.

The article will first analyse the concept of fetishism as understood within Marx’s writings and later Marxist scholarship. I draw on unorthodox interpretations of the concept, which refuse to consider fetishism as an accomplished fact and rather link it to the shortcomings of existing struggles (see also Knafo 2002). This understanding can help us drawing wider conclusions on the reasons for revolutionary failures, and conversely on its potential. Changes and stability are not to be understood as the result of the path-dependency created by the automated subject of capital, but rather by the development (or not) of forms of subjectivity and hegemonies. Second, I will consider Gramsci’s use of fetishism as developed in the *Prison Notebooks*. I will emphasise how both explicit and implicit references to fetishism provide us with valuable insights that can enrich the understanding developed by contemporary unorthodox Marxist scholarship. Building on these insights, the last section will argue that the implicit reference to fetishism in the *Prison Notebooks* is evident in Gramsci’s theorisation of the failure of revolutionary processes and, in this sense, is crucial to make sense of concepts such as hegemony and passive revolution.

An unorthodox read of fetishism

Thanks to the work of Marxists such as Isaak Rubin and György Lukács the study of commodity fetishism has become a widespread feature of the critical traditions of Marxism (Starosta 2016: 141; for recent applications, see Dimoulis & Milios 2004; Grollios 2017; Knafo 2002). Among the Marxist scholars that believe fetishism to be crucial to the understanding of capitalist dynamics,⁴ however, no unified theory can be identified. Since no in-depth analysis of the different approaches concerning fetishism is possible here, I will only briefly account for the difference between orthodox and unorthodox readings of fetishism. This distinction offers a valuable framework to understand the Marxist debates in the field as well as the use of fetishism in the *Prison Notebooks* in its relation to key concepts within Gramsci’s *oeuvre*.

The scholarly interest in fetishism follows Marx’s idea according to which capital is ultimately a product of labour and it is only through mystifying representations of reality that it can appear as something external to human activity. If we were to stop here, what we would get is an understanding of the relation between subject and object that is common to the majority of Marxist approaches: it is labour that creates the value that once alienated from it ends up putting it under increasing pressure and compulsion as if it was

its master. What appears to be more controversial is the source of this separation between subject and object, between capital and labour.⁵ Some scholars interpret this as originating from capital's compulsion itself thus understanding fetishism as an accomplished fact of capitalist societies (Arthur 2002; Bellofiore 2018; Postone 2003). Riccardo Bellofiore (2018: 511), for example, refers to capital as an 'Automatic Fetish'. Similarly, Moishe Postone (2003: 62; *original emphasis*) argues that

the quasi-objective, impersonal social forms expressed by categories such as the commodity and value do not simply disguise the 'real' social relations of capitalism (that is, class relations); rather the abstract structures expressed by those categories are those 'real' social relations.

Such an approach has obvious implication for the theory of how revolutions or changes of paradigm can develop. It is, in fact, not surprising that Postone (2013: 224; *original emphasis*) sees the overcoming of alienation as 'the abolition of the *self-grounding, self-moving Subject* (capital) and of the form of labour that constitutes and is constituted by structures of alienation' (p. 224; *original emphasis*).

These approaches describe fetishism as a fact of capitalist reality, ending up arguing that institutions and structures can, in fact, make themselves independent. I shall contend that both Marx and Gramsci reject this hypothesis, linking the apparent separation between people and social events to people's faulted perception of social reality. Marx criticised classical political economists because they 'do not conceive of capital as a relation' but rather justify

capitalist form, in which the relationship of labour to the conditions of labour is turned upside-down, so that it is not the worker who makes use of the conditions of labour, but the conditions of labour which make use of the worker. (Marx 1972: 276)

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx moves against the modern conception of production as being the scope of men, rather than the other way round, as it was in the ancient world (Marx 1973: 487–488). On the other hand, Marx adds,

when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities? (Marx 1973: 488)

This implies that also the perverted world of capitalism is ultimately the real human world, so long as people's relations take the form of relations between things.

Discussing James Mill understanding of money as a medium of exchange, Marx (1992b) replies that with the creation of money 'the *mediating function* or movement, human, social activity, by means of which the products of man mutually complement each other, is *estranged* and becomes the property of a *material thing* external to man' (p. 260). This, however, does not mean that the social mediation exercised by money is an established fact. It rather depends on the continuous act of abdication that

human subjects perform in favour of their institutions. In their attempt to rationalise their everyday experience, ‘people tend to lend an autonomy to phenomena they observe when, in fact, these phenomena are only the manifestations of social struggles’ (Knafo 2002: 160). A similar argument can be found in the Marx’s Preface to the Second Edition of the *18th Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*. While Proudhon’s account representing Bonaparte’s *coup d’etat* became the apologia of a hero, falling for the fallacies of objective historicists, Marx attempted to ‘demonstrate how the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part’. He also added that

I hope that my work will contribute toward eliminating the school-taught phrase now current, particularly in Germany, of so-called Caesarism. In this superficial historical analogy the main point is forgotten, namely, that in ancient Rome the class struggle took place only within a privileged minority, between the free rich and the free poor, while the great productive mass of the population, the slaves, formed the purely passive pedestal for these combatants. (Marx 2000: 7)

It is not difficult to see in this extract a position that closely resembles Gramsci’s reflection on all those forms of passivity that end up reinforcing the status quo (more on this later). To reinforce this idea, Marx compares this process to a religious one:⁶ ‘It is clear that this mediator becomes an actual god, for the mediator is the actual power over that which he mediates to me [...] Apart from this mediation, objects lose their value’ (Marx 1997: 267; for a similar interpretation, see Iacono 2016: 106).

It is true that, in elaborating his theory of fetishism, Marx (1990) refers to capital as an ‘automatic subject’ (p. 255). This has led some authors to conclude that man in capitalism was actually deprived of its agency and that capital was now the real subject of modernity, playing a similar role to the one fulfilled by the Spirit in Hegel’s philosophy (Arthur 2002; Bellofiore 2018: 509). Yet, it is Marx himself who shows that such a process is anything but automatic and that it is actually shaped by the choices of human actors. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx argues that if one wants to be a capitalist, she needs to sell her commodities at a higher price than the one at which she paid to produce them. To solve this issue,

our friend, the money-owner must be lucky enough to find within the sphere of circulation, on the market, a commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*] of labour, hence a creation of value. (Marx 1990: 270)

As it is clear in the *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, the ‘categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected and contemptible being ...’ is derived from the idea that ‘for man the root is man himself [sic]’ (Marx 1992a: 251; *original emphasis*).

Capitalist continuous development and reproduction does not depend on the ability of value and capital to move in seemingly automatic manners, but they rely on the availability and subjugation of labour. This ultimately suggests that fetishism is not a fact, but rather a process that can appear as a fact only through mystical, religious-like, distortions.

Fetishism in the *Prison Notebooks*

Few intellectuals in recent history have influenced the theoretical toolbox of social scientists as much as Gramsci. Terms such as ‘hegemony’, ‘passive revolution’ and ‘historic bloc’ permeate almost every field within social sciences, widely exceeding the realm of Marxist approaches. The recent attention that critical scholars have dedicated to the Italian Marxist has had the great merit of showing the crucial role that the *Prison Notebooks* can have in producing a non-deterministic read of capitalist dynamics (Frosini 2002, 2010; Modonesi 2019; Thomas 2009). When it comes to political proposals, Gramsci’s reflection is acknowledged to point towards the necessity for the subaltern classes to turn their theory into political praxis in order to produce real historical change (see, for example, Green 2015). However, still uncertain appears the relation that can be established between structural dynamics and their potentially contested nature when we read these through the lens of the *Prison Notebooks*. In fact, despite the aforementioned focus on the non-deterministic connotation of the *Prison Notebooks*, such a realisation is yet to find a proper place beyond mere philological readings of Gramsci’s texts.

The present article aims to speak to this aspect, stressing how Gramsci’s explicit and implicit use of fetishism is at the core of his understanding of the society and history that does not attribute any independence to economic laws and political structures. The unorthodox reading of fetishism delineated in the previous section can be considered an implicit theme that runs throughout Gramsci’s prison’s writings. Despite the increasing attention to both Gramsci’s thought and the concept of fetishism, almost no significant attempt of analysing the relation between the two has been made.⁷ This is not surprising, given the fact that Gramsci rarely uses the term in his writings. Yet, this section will demonstrate that the lack of explicit mentions does not equate to a disregard for the theme of fetishism itself.

As we have seen in the previous section, fetishism has both an economic connotation – criticising the ability of capital to produce and reproduce itself – and a political one – that connects human praxis to socio-historical change more in general. As it pertains to the former, Gramsci does not directly employ the term fetishism. Nevertheless, his analysis of the relation between and people and matter and more specifically between workers and the material forces of production strictly resembles Marx’s discussion in *Capital Volume I*. For example, Gramsci takes issues with vulgar materialist positions that considers ‘machines [...] as capable of producing value independently from the people who run them’ (Q7§18: 868). Capital is thus not self-valorising, as it structurally needs labour. Gramsci is here addressing an issue that has to do with the quasi-subjectivity of capital that Marx had analysed through the concepts of alienation and fetishism (Jackson 2013: 229).⁸ In this sense, although not directly employing the term, it is not true that, as Dimitri Dimoulis and John Milios (2004: 22) would have it, ‘Gramsci completely ignores the economic dimension of fetishism’.⁹ Rather, the opposite could be asserted: he gave so much for granted the fact that economic entities (such as commodities and money) can never make themselves independent from human control, that he focused his attention on the political dimension of the term.

Besides this economic dimension, in fact, Gramsci’s key concern in prison is to address the philosophical and political connotation of fetishism, and thus the unity

between human praxis and matter (Jackson 2013: 229). In this sense, the term is understood primarily as a philosophical and political one. It is exactly because he sees the political and the economic as deeply correlated that Gramsci understands the struggle against fetishism as itself a struggle against capitalism more broadly. As reminded by Fabio Frosini (2010: 171), in the *Prison Notebooks* philosophy, politics and economics are all interrelated, and despite having each a specific language they reciprocally translate into (and influence) one another.

Fetishism appears explicitly only 13 times (in nine different notes) within the whole corpus of the *Prison Notebooks*¹⁰ and, when it does, it refers exclusively to the political realm. The political connotation of fetishism is testified, for example, in Q1§43, where Gramsci mentions the term in reference to Benedetto Croce's and Giustino Fortunato's role in centralising the rural questions and thus curbed the more radical instances coming from the South (Q1§43: 36). More explicitly, in Q15§13, Gramsci writes,

How can one describe fetishism. A collective organism is constituted of single individuals, who form the organism in as much as they gave themselves and actively accept a hierarchy and a determined direction. If each of the single members think the collective organism as an entity external to herself, it is evident that this organism *de facto* does not exist anymore, but becomes a phantom of the intellect, a fetish. It is to be considered whether this very common way of thinking is not a residue of catholic transcendence and of the old paternalistic regimes: *it is common to a series of organisms, from the State, to the Nation, to Political Parties*, etc. It is normal that this happens for the Church, since, at least in Italy, the secular work [*lavorio secolare*] of the Vatican centre to annihilate every trace of internal democracy and of the intervention of the faithful in the religious activity has been fully accomplished and has become a second nature of the faithful [...]. What is surprising, and peculiar, is that the fetishism of this species is reproduced in 'voluntary' organisms, of public or state type, such as parties and trade unions. (Q15§13; my emphasis)

Already in this formulation, it is clear that Gramsci extends fetishism beyond the realm of production to all socioeconomic forms. Fetishism ultimately refers to the process through which the members that constitute an organism (being it the State, political parties, trade unions etc.) come to consider it as something independent from their activity. In doing this, people speak (or *think*) into existence the autonomy of such institutions.

In the continuation of Q15§13, he links this discussion to the seemingly powerlessness of individuals vis-à-vis collective institutions. More specifically, the theme of political organisation (central in Gramsci's writings) can be read through these lenses:

One is led to think the relations between the individual and the organism as a dualism, and to an external critical attitude of the individual towards the organism (when the attitude is not of a-critical enthusiastic admiration). In any case, *a fetishistic relation*. The individual waits for the organism to act, even if she does not operate and does not reflect about the fact that, being her attitude very widespread, the organism is necessarily inactive. Furthermore, it is to be recognised that, being widespread a deterministic and mechanistic conception of history (conception that is of common sense *and is linked to the passivity of the great popular masses*), every individual, seeing that, despite her lack of intervention, something still happens, is led to think that in fact

above the individuals it exists a phantasmagorical entity, the abstraction of the collective organism, a kind of autonomous divinity, that does not think with any concrete brain, but still thinks, that does not move with determinate human legs, but still moves, etc. (Q15§13; my emphasis)

This passage is extremely dense and can be revealing if analysed in some depth. First, Gramsci is here very explicit in linking the apparent independence of social forms (such as the state and political parties) from people's praxis with the deterministic conception of reality. In other words, institutions do not move independently of the people that compose them. Yet, the more social actors passively accept institutions as fixed entities, the more the latter will *appear as* autonomous. The relation between individuals and the collective entity they build becomes a 'fetishistic one' (Bieler & Morton 2003: 482). The reference to the key role played by civil society in the construction, reproduction and potential modification of state apparatuses should also be read in this manner (Bieler & Morton 2003: 482). Notice here the similarity with Marx's (1990: 164) description of a table in *Capital*, where he argues that, as soon as this is seen as a commodity, it 'evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will'. It is also significant that Gramsci associates this impoverished conceptualisation of reality not only to the subaltern classes, but also to a dominant strand of Italian historiography. In particular – and similar to the reference to 'deterministic and mechanistic conception of history' in Q15§13 – in Q9§106 and in its C-text Q19§5, Gramsci labels as 'fetishistic history' the tendency to see historical events as the result of the actions of 'abstract and mythological "characters"' – an approach through which the historical process is 'mechanised and externalised' (Q9§106: 1169–1170; Q19§5: 1980). The criticism of such an approach is recurrently emphasised throughout the *Prison Notebooks* – even though Gramsci seems to prefer the notion of 'mechanicism' to define it.¹¹

Second, it should come as no surprise the fact that Gramsci views as equally insufficient the external critical attitude and the a-critical enthusiastic admiration of the subalterns. Both approaches, in fact, tend to consider the social organism as something that is fundamentally external and beyond human praxis. This resembles Gramsci's criticism of Sorel, accused of 'a fetishistic syndicalism and economism' (Q15§47: 1808), brings about passivity in the workers. Differently from Sorel, in fact, Gramsci 'appreciated education and self-education [...] and he did not share the syndicalist intellectual's fascination with the imagery of rude, uneducated worker intellectual-basher' (Levy 1986: 43). In another note, Gramsci argues that the Sorelian 'myth', which finds its highest concretisation in the general strike (Q13§1: 1556), is a clear example of passivity inasmuch as it takes as fixed those aspects of society that the workers are supposed to challenge (e.g. the current balance of forces). According to Gramsci, syndicalism is mainly reactive, that it lacks the *pro-active* and creative character associated with what he calls the Modern Prince (on this point, see also Jackson 2018). It is for this reason that in Q15§39 Gramsci takes seriously Ugo Spirito's critique of syndicalism, asking himself whether 'abstract and formal syndicalism is only a kind of fetishism and superstition?' (Q15§39: 1796).

Third, it is very significant that, as he discusses fetishism, Gramsci associates it with other (more developed) parts of his thought – such as common sense, passivity and

mechanicism – creating a link between them. The fetishistic view that makes people think that even if they do not act institutions can evolve by themselves results in common sense and determinism, and ultimately in a lack individual and collective responsibility (for similar interpretations, see Fifi 2019; Modonesi 2019).¹² Gramsci assumes a similar correlation in Q11§17, where the ‘semi-fetishism’ that natural sciences ‘have assumed in the framework of the philosophy of praxis’ is associated with the ‘naïve metaphysics of common sense and of philosophical materialism’ which ‘is exhilarated’ by the subjectivistic conception of reality (Q11§17: 1413–1415). Fetishism can ultimately be seen as the general mental attitude that shapes all of these more concrete situations. Concepts such as common sense, mechanicism and passivity are all used by Gramsci to define instances in which people look at social and economic events as independent from their will and actions. It must be emphasised, however, that notwithstanding the common ground between these notions, the general (*fetishist*) attitude they point towards comes in different forms. Passivity, for example, seems to be used mainly when fetishist views of reality result in lack of action from the subalterns. Common sense, on the other hand, signals those instances in which the interpretation of the social world as independent from the individual leads people to abide to pre-conceived ideologies. Finally, mechanicism is employed to define pseudo-coherent theories of social change that overemphasise structural and economic factors over the underlying social and political developments. Fetishism thus emphasises the fact that ‘the sedimented layers of the anachronistic tradition continue to be reproduced not simply from above, but by the very groups that stand to benefit from the negation of their influence’ (Jackson 2016: 221).

It is to be noticed that Gramsci never takes seriously the separation between social forms and people. Fetishism is always seen as a distorted interpretation of reality on the part of the subalterns. On the flipside, the combination of critical and practical activities that Gramsci poses at the centre of a revolutionary project are in themselves de-fetishising practices that free people from the understanding of capitalism as something fundamentally external to them and removed from their grasp. In this sense, Roberto Finelli (2010) is right to argue that in Gramsci structural issues take a secondary role. Yet, this far from being the fruit of an impoverished conception of class struggle, it is the very result of a conscious elaboration of Marx’s refusal to understand economic and political categories as things in themselves. The understanding of fetishism as the result of lacking intellectual elaboration from the subaltern is in Gramsci brought to its extreme consequences. It is for this reason that the first act of liberation consists in understanding how one’s everyday practice is linked to the seemingly extramundane continuation of capitalist dynamics. It is no coincidence that in Gramsci, as in Marx, a clear connection is seen between fetishism and religion. As in the Feuerbachian understanding of Christianity, religion dominates over people only to the extent that the latter are not able to understand that no extramundane force determines their lives. The dialectical process that brings religion back to earth is the same one that discredits the subjectivity of capital and the state and understands them as historically specific human creations (Jackson 2013: 230). It is only thanks to people’s naturalisation of certain worldviews that ideas can appear as independent entities. This approach ultimately shows how Gramsci links capitalist continuity with the possibility of its overcoming. He argues that the present is not

only an ‘overcoming’ of the past, but more specifically its ‘criticism’. Such criticism must also be directed, according to Gramsci, to ‘that part of ourselves which corresponds to it [the past]’. Ultimately, ‘we need to be more adherent to the present, *which we ourselves have helped creating*, having consciousness of the past and of its continuity (and reliving)’ (Q1§156:137; *author’s emphasis*).¹³

Gramsci explains the limits of thinking the external world as detached from conscious human activity in the following manner:

The popular public [*pubblico popolare*] ‘believe’ that the external world is objective and it is this ‘belief’ that must be analysed, criticised, overcome scientifically. This belief is in fact of religious origin, also when who ‘believes’ is religiously indifferent [*religiosamente indifferente*]. Since for centuries it has been believed that the world has been created by a God before man, and man has already found the world created and catalogued [*creato e catalogato*], defined once and for all, *this belief became a fact of ‘common sense’* even when the religious sentiment is muffled or adumbrated. (Q8§215; *author’s emphasis*)

Here again Gramsci’s remarks on common sense are strictly linked to the concept of fetishism. In fact, in the same note, as he discusses the role of science within historical materialism, he defines fetishism as ‘a rebirth of religion in other guise [*rinascita della religione sotto altre spoglie*]’ (Q8§215). If one is to fight against fetishist tendency, she ultimately needs to realise that not only capitalist categories but also general knowledge and objectivity are historically and humanly created. Gramsci is consistent in linking the abstract discussion on the philosophical conception of reality to concrete struggles. In fact, the subalterns should engage in a continuous ‘struggle for objectivity’ (Q11§17) and as long as they accept the external world, in general, and socioeconomic categories, in particular, as self-moving entities, they will be unable to realise their own emancipation.

This section has traced the use of fetishism in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci employs the term particularly in reference to people’s understanding of socioeconomic events and institutions as independent from their own activity. This problem is a recurrent theme in the *Prison Notebooks*, widely exceeding the 13 explicit mentions of the term, and often expressed through the notions of ‘common sense’, ‘mechanicism’ and ‘passivity’. As I have already argued, seeing these concepts as interrelated carries important consequences for the theorisation of changes and stability at the social level. Conscious and organised activity from the subalterns (or lack thereof) is the ultimate determinant of the potential success (or failure) of revolutionary processes. Engagement with key concepts such as hegemony and passive revolution in the next section will further elaborate on this point.

Fetishism, hegemony and (passive) revolution

The previous section has argued that fetishism constitutes a hidden recurrent theme in the *Prison Notebooks*. Explicit and implicit references within Gramsci’s writings, in fact, reproduce arguments made by Marx in relation to institutions as being always socially constructed and reproduced. Fetishistic views of reality are at the basis of a variety of self-defeating practices that Gramsci defines through the concepts of common sense,

passivity and mechanicism and that facilitate the re-assertion and conservation of the status quo. Such an understanding of fetishism points to a clear theory of the failure of the revolutionary process, in which the accent is placed on the shortcomings of subaltern groups. This section will further emphasise this aspect in reference to crucial concepts of Gramsci's *oeuvre*, such as hegemony and passive revolution.

The *Prison Notebooks* link the failure of the revolutionary process to the shortcomings of the subaltern groups and, conversely, the potential for revolution develops from the masses' realisation that changes and stability in social forms are ultimately dependent on their praxis (or lack thereof). Such an idea is well encapsulated in a note that Gramsci writes in Notebook 8, in which (similar to what he said in Q15§13 in reference to fetishism) he criticises the faultiness of seeing the historical process as independent from human subjects, and from the subalterns in particular. Gramsci writes,

when the subaltern becomes diligent and responsible, mechanicism appears sooner or later as an imminent peril [...] the limits and the dominance of the force of things are restricted, why? Because, at the end, whereas yesterday the subaltern was a thing, today he is not a thing anymore but a historical person; whereas yesterday he was irresponsible because he resisted an external will, today he is irresponsible because he does not resist, despite being an active agent. But has he ever been mere resistance, mere thing, mere irresponsibility? Certainly not, and that is why it always is necessary to demonstrate the futility of mechanic determinism. (Q8§205: 1064)

Once again, Gramsci is here linking people's fetishistic view of reality to the continuation of what appear to be self-moving socioeconomic structures. More importantly, the acceptance of this link reinforces the emphasis on the need for individual and collective self-development as a key component of emancipation.

Struggles are thus strictly connected to historical change. Stability is not the product of external impositions or mechanistic historical paths; rather, they are dependent on the passive attitude of subaltern groups that (actively) help reproducing institutions and structures. Institutions can appear as self-constituting only to the extent that the subalterns do not realise their historical role. Fetishism thus represents for Gramsci a way to make sense of both the current insufficient state of struggles and, exactly for this reason, the potentiality for change inherent in society. Understanding fetishism as dependent on subalterns' shortcomings is ultimately the key to see the failure of a revolutionary process as *passive* revolution. In fact, Gramsci argues that to avoid the risk of 'fatalism' and 'historical defeatism' associated with passive revolution, we must emphasise that it 'presupposes, and indeed postulates as necessary, a vigorous antithesis' (Q15§62: 1827). The extant literature has long acknowledged Gramsci's call, through the concept of passive revolution, to develop strong opposition capable of subverting mechanicism and fatalism (Morton 2007, 2013: 206; Roccu 2017). Morton (2010: 206), for example, recognises the dialectical nature of the concept and the fact that it calls for 'a vigorous antithesis' (Q15§62: 1827), thus 'for a process of de-pacification and active revolution by and within the action of the popular classes' (Thomas 2013: 30). My argument is that scholars should more clearly understand the concept as a *positive* description of how changes and stability develop. In other words, the reference to passive revolution emphasises a

strong link between the possibility for elite-engineered political economic reforms and the absence of vigorous antitheses. This diverges from the interpretation of passive revolution provided by Andreas Bieler and Adam Morton (2018: 19) when they argue that the notion

can refer to: 1) a revolution without mass participation, or a 'revolution from above', involving elite-engineered social and political reform that draws on foreign capital and associated ideas while lacking a national-popular base. [...] and 2) how a revolutionary form of political transformation is pressed into a conservative project of restoration in which popular demands of class struggle still play some role.

Witness how both of these formulations rely on the coercion of the ruling class in order to understand the lack of a real revolutionary moment.¹⁴ On the other hand, the concept of passive revolution signals that it is the passivity of subaltern groups to allow top-down and elite-orchestrated changes.

The underpinnings of Gramsci's use of passive revolution can be better appreciated when looking at his treatment of the Italian *Risorgimento*. He emphasises how the subalternity of the Action Party vis-à-vis the Moderates played a key role in the outcome of the struggle. More explicitly, he quotes Vittorio Emanuele II as he remarked that he had the Action Party 'in his pockets' (Q1§44: 41). Gramsci also highlights that 'the Action Party was historically led by Cavour and Vittorio Emanuele II' (Q1§44: 41). The concept of passive revolution expresses 'the absence of a popular cohesive initiative in the development of Italian history and the other fact that such development has occurred as reaction of the dominant classes to the *sporadic, elementary and fragmented subversivism* of the popular masses' (Q10§41: 1324; *author's emphasis*). The ability of dominant classes to reinforce continuity through calculated and limited structural changes (expressed through the concept of 'revolution') is thus connected to the fact that the potential opposition is characterised by a mix of consensus, acquiescence, and fragmented and disorganised dissensus (hence, the reference to 'passivity'). The relation between passive revolution and passivity that I assume here resonates with the one proposed by Massimo Modonesi (2014: 160), when he argues that coercive mechanisms (such as those encapsulated within the concept of Caesarism) allude indirectly 'to the sporadic and inorganic character of the popular struggle'. In sum, the leader or leaders of passive revolutionary stances operate by 'filling a void' left open by the wider societal level (Modonesi 2019: 101). It is in this light that we can make sense of the understanding of passive revolution not 'as a [political] programme [...], but as a criterion of interpretation in the absence of other active elements in a dominant fashion' (Q15§62: 1827).

As a consequence, subalterns need to continuously grapple with the problem of hegemony, recognising that if they do not formulate independent and coherent views of the world, they will necessarily fall into pre-conceived conceptions. In this light, it becomes crucial to ask:

is it preferable to 'think' without critical consciousness, in disaggregate and occasional manner, hence 'participate' to a view of the world that is 'imposed' mechanically by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups within which each is automatically involved

since his entry in the conscious world [...] or is it preferable to elaborate an autonomous view of the world [*la propria concezione del mondo*] consciously and critically and thus [...] choose one's own sphere of activity, actively participating to the production of the world history, being guide of one's own and not accepting passively and acquiescently [*passivamente e supinamente*] from the external the footprint of one's personality? (Q11§12: 1375–1376)

Like Marx, Gramsci makes the correlation between fragmentation (occasional and dis-aggregate thought) and the 'automatic', passive acceptance of the view of the world of one's own social group. In this sense, it can be convincingly argued that Gramsci's philosophy of praxis not only points in the direction of a political project, but also to the positive recognition of how changes and stability develop. The dialectical nature of history itself is the result of the 'hard work' through which a great portion of humanity that previously did not play any political role (Marx 1992c: 202–203) starts to think and act independently. The fetishism of the subalterns, and their consequential passivity, common sense and mechanicism, are never mere corollaries to the power of things. Rather, it is thanks to these self-defeating practices that social phenomena can be considered as independent in the first place. Struggles that start from fetishistic views of reality, therefore, not only fail to meet their revolutionary goal, but at the same time reassert the system that they were meant to subvert.

The repercussions that this understanding has in practice can be found in Notebook 3, where Gramsci discusses the position of peasants in Southern Italy (defined as *morti di fame*, the 'starvelings') and their 'generic' hate for the so-called 'masters' (Q3§46: 323) matured in conjunction with the highly uneven development of the Italian state since the beginning of the 19th century (see also Fifi 2019: 68–69; Morton 2007: 60). The polemic position of the peasantry, Gramsci argues, can be seen as a primary level of rejection of the constituted order. Yet, it is insufficient to build 'class consciousness' inasmuch as 'not only does it not have an exact consciousness of its own historical personality, but it does not even have the consciousness of the historical personality and limits of its opponent' (Q3§46: 323–324). The praxis of peripheral groups is thus understood as giving rise to a vague 'cosmopolitanism' that proves inadequate to build a revolutionary position based on a thorough knowledge of the state and on an organic class consciousness. Gramsci ultimately attributes a stage on 'non-activity' (linked to the lack of 'comprehension of one's own role') to the sporadic and subversive actions of the *morti di fame*, and argues that this needs to be linked to "subversion" from above, thus [...] an arbitrary politics and of a personal or group clique [*cricca personale o di gruppo*]' (Q3§46: 326–327). This reinforces the point according to which, in Gramsci, the leading position of restricted groups is always mirrored (and, in some sense, it is the epiphenomenon of) the cultural passivity of the subalterns.

The example of the *morti di fame* connects the inconsistent intellectual production of subaltern groups both to the fragmentation of struggles and to the bureaucratisation of politics that leaves coercive and intellectual power in the hands of restricted groups (Fifi 2019: 69). Even historically influential figures such as the Pope, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile base their leverage on the fact that their doctrines align with everyday experience and culture of the popular masses (see, for example, Gramsci's discussion in Q10§41). Intellectuals, while having a clear role in 'representing the entire

cultural tradition of a people' (Gramsci 2016: 387), cannot elevate themselves beyond such cultural substratum. As Gramsci (2016: 388) puts it, '[i]t is absurd to think that she [the intellectual] can [...] break with the whole past and place herself on the terrain of a completely new ideology'.

Such an interpretation apparently leaves un-explained the emphasis on the coercive mechanisms that still finds significant echo in the *Prison Notebooks*. However, a closer read into Gramsci treatment of the relation between coerciveness and hegemony can elucidate how these two apparently contradictory views can coexist. Gramsci describes the crisis of the hegemonic apparatus of the dominant group after World War I in the following way:

First of all, why has it disaggregated? Perhaps because a strong collective and antagonistic political will has developed? *If that was the case, the problem would have been solved in favour of this antagonistic force.* It has disaggregated, rather, because of purely mechanic causes of different type: 1) because great masses, previously passive, started moving, but in a chaotic and disorganised movement, without direction, i.e.: without a precise collective political will; 2) Because the middle classes that during the war had a position of leadership and command, have lost it during the time of peace ... 3) Because the antagonistic forces resulted incapable of organising for their own advantage such disorder. (Q7§80, 912–913; author's emphasis)

Particularly significant in this extract are two aspects. First, for Gramsci the crisis of the hegemonic apparatus is played on the subjective level, as it was caused by the movement of the antagonistic forces that were previously passive. Second, the restoration of the hegemonic apparatus is possible only thanks to the fact that those antagonistic forces were not able to create a collective alternative, hence a real counter-hegemonic project.

For Gramsci the dominance of capitalist dynamics is related to the passivity of the subaltern; a passivity that, however, is not presupposed, but actually requires them to fight for emancipation. A clear example of this can be found in Gramsci's critique of trade unionism as intended by key Italian figures of syndicalism, such as Bruno Buozzi and Mario Guarneri, accused of ultimately falling into superstition and dogmatism. In fact, although trade unions might perform a progressive function, when taken as the end point of class struggle, they tend to implicitly legitimise the capitalist system they are meant to subvert. Gramsci (1978) concludes that

the trade union is nothing other than a commercial company of a purely capitalist type, which aims to secure, in the interests of the proletariat, the maximum price for the commodity of labour, and to establish a monopoly over this commodity in the national and international fields. (p. 76)

It is in the realm of struggles that what trade unions *fetishistically* give for granted (i.e. the economic structure) is established and potentially contested. On the contrary, the Factory Councils were seen as proposing a different paradigm that not only refused the logic of capitalism but were meant to turn their collective will into a new form of hegemony, through the self-development and government of the working class.

As in Marx, the trans-historical nature of capitalism veils its historical specificity. History is not only characterised by a series of modes of production or as a process that

proceeds through authoritative rationalisation, but it is rather characterised by a series of hegemonies and collective subjectivities. As highlighted by Roberto Finelli (2011), Gramsci's historical subject

is never presupposed [*presupposto*], but always posed [*posto*]. This means that it is not merely something generated and given in relation to the economic conflict between classes, but the result of a process of organization and unification that passes prevalently through the emancipation from the fallacies of representation and perception of life that that subject, being subaltern, necessarily possesses in itself at the beginning.

As Modonesi (2019) has it, 'Gramsci is a theorist not of subalternity, but of the escape from subalternity, of the historical construction of an autonomous social and political subject capable of contending against hegemony' (p. 33).

Gramsci does not negate the existence of bureaucracy or elite-orchestrated changes; he rather negates the possibility that bureaucracy can be kept in place by the ruling bloc, without the cooperation (active or passive) of the subaltern groups. In other words, '[i]t is precisely because hegemony is already at work within subalternity itself, as a condition and consequence of the subaltern classes' disaggregation, that a potential transition from the subaltern to the hegemonic is conceivable' (Thomas 2018: 867). His message seems to be that it is only by seeing the seeds of continuity in the fetishism and everyday short-comings of potentially transformative agency, that we can conceptualise the potentiality for resistance and emancipation. In his own words, 'we must be more adherent to the present, which we ourselves have contributed to creating, having consciousness of the past and its continuation (and reliving)' (Q1§156: 136). More specifically, it is exactly because institutions such as the state have no life in themselves that no determinism is linked to their possible 'use'. Such structures can be modified and directed towards more progressive stances by the creation of a collective subject with counter-hegemonic potential (what Gramsci calls the 'Modern Prince').

Conclusion

This article has shed light on Gramsci's use of the term fetishism. Despite not being as present and pervasive within the *Prison Notebooks* as other concepts, more deeply rooted in Gramscian scholarship (such as hegemony, historic bloc), fetishism is not as marginal in Gramsci's reflection as it is usually believed. More importantly, his understanding of the concept – when compared to the development of other key discussions surrounding, for instance, his theory of history – reveals a much deeper role of fetishism than it is suggested by the appearance of the word itself. It could be argued that fetishism is almost never explicitly present in the *Prison Notebooks*, but gives a constant implicit contribution throughout Gramsci's writings.

Gramsci uses the term fetishism only 13 times in the *Prison Notebooks*. In those instances, he converges with Marx's use, both in its economic and political sense. More importantly, the same theory of the failure of the revolutionary process is expressed (although not using the word 'fetishism') *ad abundantiam* in his prison's writings. Fetishistic views of reality are the basis for a series of more concrete attitudes that Gramsci

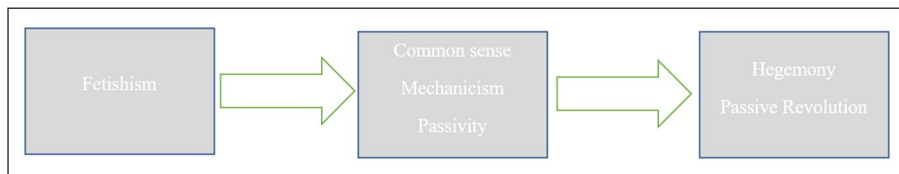


Figure 1. Role of fetishism in relation to other concepts within the *Prison Notebooks*.

defines particularly through the concepts of common sense, mechanicism and passivity. In turn, these attitudes facilitate elite-driven political changes (passive revolution) and prevent the creation of cohesive alternatives to the status quo (thus resulting in a reinforcement of existing hegemonies). A schematic representation of the link between these concepts is provided in Figure 1. The de-fetishising practices that Gramsci recurrently calls for in his writings – from the abstract appeal to individual and collective responsibility in the first number of the *Ordine Nuovo* (Gramsci 1919) to the necessity to form a cohesive and intellectually coherent political party – can all be seen as ways to break this reinforcing mechanism of the status quo. Fetishism thus appears as a key component of a theory of revolution or, better, of a theory of the failure of the revolutionary process and of continuity in the established order. All social forms are *only apparently* detached from human praxis, while in fact they are continuously affirmed, maintained and potentially overturned. By employing fetishistic views of reality, the subalterns ultimately speak (and think) into existence the autonomy of institutions and structures.

Gramsci's (mostly implicit) reference to fetishism gives us, conversely, a theory of revolution: it is only by understanding the continuation in the order of capital as strictly linked to the shortcomings of the subalterns that the potential for revolution can be conceptualised in the first place. The re-acquisition of individual and collective responsibility that comes along with de-fetishising practices is the fundamental act of rebellion at the basis of any (theoretical and practical) possibility to develop a truly revolutionary subject.

Notes

1. This move to extend fetishism beyond the fetishism of economic relations is not accepted by the majority of Marxist scholars. See, for example, Dimoulis and Milios' (2004) critique of György Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*.
2. This lack of attention to the term was, however, a more generalised feature of Marxist theorists at the time of the Second and Third international, therefore, it cannot be attributed to a specific aversion on Gramsci's part.
3. While the former is widely acknowledged within Gramscian literature (Frosini 2010; Thomas 2009), the latter is only recently coming to the fore (see, for example, Meret 2020; Modonesi 2019).
4. The list of those that think otherwise is just as long. See, for example, Althusser (2005); Althusser et al. (2018); Callinicos (1983).
5. To be sure, the answer to this latter question also often influences the attention that Marxist authors dedicate to the former (less contested) one and to fetishism altogether.
6. As we will see in the next section, this reference to religion is at least as crucial in Gramsci's elaboration.

7. Exception can be found in Dimoulis and Milios (2004: 21–22) and Jackson (2013: 229). Yet, Dimoulis & Milios' mention of Gramsci can be considered rather marginal, while Jackson focuses prevalently on the role of subjectivity in the *Prison Notebooks*. Bieler and Morton (2003) also touch upon Gramsci's use of fetishism in relation to Open Marxist theory. Despite the fact that they do not single out 'fetishism' as a key concept in the *Prison Notebooks*, the argument that Gramsci anticipates (and elaborates more coherently) some of the insights of Open Marxism is a key contribution of their work.
8. As it pertains to the former, it must be remembered that Gramsci could not read the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, published after his incarceration.
9. On the other hand, they are more prompt than most Gramscian scholars to acknowledge that 'Gramsci analyses fetishistic phenomena in the ideological apparatuses of the state (church, parties, trade unions, nationally-oriented scholarship)' (Dimoulis & Milios 2004: 22).
10. In Q1§43, Q8§215, Q9§106, Q11§17, Q15§13, Q15§39, Q15§47, Q17§8 and Q19§5. Note that in Q17§8, the reference to fetishism is part of a quote from Ernst Walsers, so cannot be associated with Gramsci's use.
11. See, for example, Q8§205 (and its C-text Q11§12), Q9§130, Q11§51 and Q13§1.
12. On the analysis of how insufficient forms of praxis prevent the subalterns from reaching emancipation, see Green (2015) and Modonesi (2019: 100).
13. On this point, see also Frosini (2019: 133).
14. For a more thorough engagement with the literature on passive revolution, see Fifi (2019).

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ORCID iD

Gianmarco Fifi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5524-3366>

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Author biography

Gianmarco Fifi is Nicholas Barr Fellow in European Political Economy at the European Institute at LSE.