

Secrets of the Sexual Fetish: How Sin Became the New Normal

by David Rosen

Pleasure is, so to speak, nature's vengeance...
Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno¹

Fetish at your fingertips

Fans of *Sex and the City* may remember when "the Rabbit," a vibrator, made its guest appearance on HBO in 1998. One of the show's characters, Charlotte, got hooked on it, propelling the sex toy from the TV screen into the bedrooms of many hip, young women throughout the country. Charlotte and her Rabbit helped legitimize sex toys and female masturbation. The product came from Vibratex, a company founded in 1983 that makes erotic products for women.²

The appearance of the Rabbit on a very popular cable series was part of the rebranding of sex paraphernalia as "sexual wellness" products, a process that helped mainstream the sex toy. As the sex toy was assimilated into the marketplace, the fetish as an object of perverse erotic desire lost much of its traditionally illicit character and became an all-American erotic indulgence. Welcome to the new normal.*

For decades, shoppers, mostly men often dubbed the "raincoat crowd," slinked into XXX-rated shops in a down-market part of town to purchase a sex-related product, whether a vibrator, dildo, porn magazine or flick. Those days are over. A handful of sex-affirming retailers like San Francisco's Good Vibration, Seattle's

Babeland and New York's Pleasure Chest have, for decades, offered discriminating shoppers, mostly women and gay men, an opportunity to check out and buy something erotically special. Consumerism has caught up with these sex-paraphernalia pioneers and more mainstream outlets have entered the growing "sex-wellness" business. Retailers range from high-end specialty chains Nordstrom and Brookstone to mass-marketers Walgreens and Target, and even crusty down-market Wal-Mart. But the leading sex-products vendor is Amazon, offering an estimated 60,000 products for those with a credit card and a certain yen.³



One of the popular venues to acquire a favorite sex product is a "passion party," a women-only get-together often held at a suburban home. Toys, lubricants and costumes are sold; cocktails are often served, stories are told, secrets are shared and good-cheer is had by all. Like a Tupperware party, this multi-tier marketing scheme uses a local "host," "consultant" or "sales rep" to organize the event who receives a commission (often 10%) from the night's sales. The host acquires products from a sex-toy provider like Athena's Home Novelties, Fantasia Home Parties, For Ladies Only, Party Gals, Temptations Parties and Pure Romance; the industry even has a trade association,

* Image = RabbitVibrators.com.

Certified Adult Home Party Association. *BusinessWeek* reported that, in 2012, Pure Romance had 75,000 consultants and may have hit \$120 million in sales. A surprise to many, some of the moralists waging today's faltering "culture war" against abortion and gay rights, including fundamentalist Christian women, attend such get-togethers.⁴ For such moralists, sex toys can enhance a wholesome marriage.

No one knows the real size of the sex toy market, with estimates all over the place. Adam & Eve, a leading online sex-products retailer founded in 1970, pegs Americans annual spending on sex paraphernalia at \$15 billion. Belus Capital Advisors estimate that from 2008 to 2013, while the nation grappled with a trying recession, sex paraphernalia sales rose by 12.5 percent. It projects annual industry sales will hit \$52 billion by 2020. Dave Levine, the founder of CNV.com, a sex-products wholesaler, estimates total annual sales at between \$750 million to \$1 billion. And the *CBC* reports, "Market research company, IBIS World, estimates the adult store industry in America is now worth \$634 million, more than doubling sales since 2007."⁵

In 2010, as Christian conservatives railed against illicit sex, Adam & Eve released a study claiming that 82 percent of adults used sex toys, that 44 percent of women 18 to 60 years have used a sex-enhancement product and 78 percent of those women were in a relationship when they used the product. In a 2015 survey, it found that two-fifths (41%) of women and one-third of men (32%) admitted owning one sex toy; just 4.5 percent of women and 3.8 percent of men owned six or more toys.⁶

Two factors contributed to the transformation of the fetish into the sex toy. One involved changes in the

sex practices Americans engaged in, be they ordinary people or radicals, male or female, gay or straight. Many of the practices involved a fetish. The other involved changes in the medical diagnosis – as well as the social and legal definitions -- of fetishism, of what was "normal"; the standard is formally codified in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) mental-health bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*.

The transformation of the fetish into the sex toy signifies a new era of sexuality in America, one with a greater sense of sexual "freedom" than any period in U.S. history. In the early 21st century, anything goes as long as it's between "consenting" adults or age-appropriate young people. Immoral and criminal practices involve the violation of consent and include rape, pedophile, sex slavery, knowingly infecting someone with STD/AIDS and an activity that truly harms a participant.

Today's concept of the fetish grows out of the two very different modes of analyses -- one originally formulated by Marx, the economic or social; the other by Freud, the psychological or personal. For more than a century, their works articulated -- separately and distinctly if parallel and complementarily -- the two primary modes of critical analyses of modern life. Both anchored their respective analyses in the notion of the fetish, a distinguishing feature of capitalist society since the early-19th century.

In *Capital* (1867), Marx described the commodity as a fetish, a "mysterious thing" that serves as the object of capitalist exchange. He noted: "There is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things." He added, "In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must

take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race." Fetishism was a quasi-religious experience, at once individual yet social; objects of human labor are shorn of their use value, the human aspects of production, and became mystified products of consumption, embodied exchange value.⁷

Half a century later, Freud offered a very different interpretation of the fetish, one equally religiously inspired but anchored in the deeper mysteries of self-identity, sexuality and its repression. In his essay, "The Sexual Aberrations" (1905), he stated: "No other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as [fetishism], such is the peculiarity of the phenomena to which it gives rise." He clarified: "What is substituted for the sexual object is some part of the body (such as the foot or hair) which is in general very much inappropriate for sexual purposes, or some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality (i.e., a piece of clothing or underlinen)."⁸

Efforts have been made to link Marx and Freud, most notably by theorists associated with the Frankfurt School. Their efforts reflected a common historical experience, the quarter-century-long crisis of modern capitalism. It was a history defined by the capitalist West slogging through WW-I, the Depression and WW-II; stabilization came with the prosperity of postwar reconversion and the relative stability of the Cold War. One unanticipated outcome of the rise of consumer capitalism was the eclipse of traditional patriarchal authority. To date, none of the efforts to link Marx

and Freud have addressed the role of the fetish and how its meaning changed along with capitalist society.* Nor has an analysis reflected the new world order, of post-Cold War, postmodern capitalism marked as an increasingly globalizing, financialized system. The fetish is an instrument of social praxis; its secrets reveal how sin became the new normal.

The sexual fetish

The fetish has long been understood as a mysterious object of human existence, an instrument of personal and social experience. During the 19th century, it was conceived as an object of mystical identity and a subject of rigorous study. William Pietz and Tomoko Masuzawa, among others, have shown that the fetish captivated much of European academic scholarship, notably anthropology and *Religionswissenschaft*, the science of religion. Charles de Brosses, August Comte, Emile Durkheim and innumerable now all-but-forgotten scholars saw the fetish as a material anchor, a talisman, to culturally-specific forms of spirituality. It was the primitive thing-in-itself, negating the transcendence of materiality yet, simultaneously, fulfilling its promise. As Masuzawa observes, "It is this special tie to materiality, or rather, this ineradicable essence of the fetish as materiality, and the alleged absence of any symbolic (or supra-material) dimension, that distinguishes fetishism from idolatry, or 'polytheism,' as idolatry came to be more commonly called in the course of the nineteenth century."⁹

* Laura Mulvey outlines elements of such an approach as applied to movies in "Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture," *October*, vol. 65 (Summer, 1993), pp. 3-20.

In 19th century England, while scholars like F. Max Müller, W. Robertson Smith and Edward B. Tylor searched for the secrets of the religious fetish in primitive totems and the Hebrew Bible, the sexual fetish flourished in London as an instrument of immoral pleasure. Some considered the half-century between 1780s and the start of the Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 as the "heyday" of English fetishism, especially flagellation.¹⁰ Flagellation is a particular fetishism combining the rituals of punishment with the pleasures of pain and employing a wide variety of instruments of ritualized desire. It's a fetishistic indulgence that continues to be practiced today.

According to Iwan (Ivan) Bloch, a leading authority on early-modern sexual perversion, "it is possible to maintain that England was at one time the classic of flagellation." In the 1830s, Theresa Berkley, at 28 Charlotte Street (today's 84-94 Hallam Street), ran one of London's grand flagellation parlors. Bloch found that Mrs. Berkley "could be jovial and amusing; and used to find out every inclination, every whim, every mood, every wish of her clients, and satisfy them, as soon as ever she was suitably paid." Further, he stressed that "her arsenal of instruments were vastly more complete than that of any other governess."¹¹ A fellow mistress of the night, one Mrs. Wilson, described the tools of Mrs. Berkley's establishment with acute rigor:

"Her supply of birch was extensive, and kept in water so that it was always green and pliant: she had a shaft with a dozen whip thongs on each of them; a dozen different sizes of cat-o-nine tails, some with needle points worked into them; various kinds of thin bending canes; leather straps like coach traces; battledores made of thick sole-leather, with inch nails run through to docket, and currycomb tough hides rendered callous by years flagellation. Holly brushes, furze

brushes; a prickly evergreen, called butchers brush; and during summer, glass and China vases filled with a constant supply of green nettles, with which she often restored the dead to life."

The full array of indulgences afforded a visitor were considerable, as Mrs. Wilson noted: "Thus, at her shop, whoever went with plenty of money, could be birched, whipped, fustigated, scourged, needle-pricked, half-hung, holly-brushed, furze-brushed, butcher-brushed, stinging nettled, curry-combed, phlebotomized, and tortured till he had a belly full."¹²

During the *fin de siècle* era, a group of European medical scholars and sexual reformers (and sometimes they were the same) confronted what was widely perceived as a crisis of sexuality that threatened the promise of modernity. Sexual crimes appeared to be increasing; greater incidences of sexual dysfunction -- involving impotence among men and "hysteria" among women -- were reported; more "inverts" seemed to be visible throughout society; female prostitutes seemed to be on city streets in greater number; and more works of pornography -- in word, image and live display -- appeared and were being actively consumed. Something seemed to be profoundly disrupting the traditional moral order.

In response, these researchers began to systematically redefine the sexual practices of men and (to a lesser extent) women. Forsaking the age-old religious notion of sin, this new generation of trained medical doctors and specialists developed a more "scientific" and legalistic analyses to the age-old quandary about unacceptable sexual practices. This movement was led by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Alfred Binet, Havlock Ellis, Mangus Hirshfeld and, of course, Sigmund Freud. One practice rigorously considered was fetishism,

the ritualized use of eroticized objects of desire.

Krafft-Ebing's was the first to link the fetish to immoral and illegal practices. His most famous work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886, has been described as an "encyclopedia of the perversions." It is a chronicle of 237 case studies of unacceptable sexual practices that he identified as "abnormality." He took particular interest in fetishism, defining it as that which "invests imaginary presentations of separate parts of the body or portions of raiment of the opposite sex, or even simply pieces of clothing-material, with voluptuous sensations." Going further, he observed: "The pathological aspect of this manifestation may be deduced from the fact that the fetish of parts of the body never stands in direct relation to sex; that it concentrates the whole sexual interest in the one part abstracted from the entire body."¹³ Two years later, Binet, in his treatise, *Le Fetichisme dans l'amour*, appears to have been the first to apply the more traditional anthropological or religious concept of the fetish to the object of sexual desire. He distinguished between normal love and something other than normal, often involving objects of desire: "Normal love appears as the result of a complicated fetishism."¹⁴

Ellis re-conceptualized the fetishistic object of desire into an expression of "individual taste in beauty." He defined such desire as "erotic symbolism" and noted that the fetish was so universal in application and mysterious in being that "even a mere shadow may become a fetish." He argued that "of all the manifestations of sexual psychology, normal and abnormal, [fetishes] are the most specifically human. More than any others they involve the potential plastic force of the imagination."¹⁵ Today, Hirschfeld is recognized as a

pioneering sexologist and gay-rights activist during the post-WW-I era. He established the well-respected Institute of Sexual Science in Berlin that was closed down by the Nazis and its remarkable library destroyed in an infamous bonfire in 1933. He noted in his 1916 work, *Sexual Pathology*: "the number of fetishes is unlimited. From head to foot there is no tiny spot on the body, and from head-covering to foot-wrapping there is no little fold of attire from a fetishistic attraction cannot arise."¹⁶

Freud argued that the fetish had two complementary functions. First, it serves as a ritualized articulation of repression, a powerful -- and erotically gratifying! -- defense against the terror of the castration complex (for males). Second, it is a highly personalized object or practice serving as an eroticized substitute for the true object of desire, the subject (the mother). He acknowledged that in some cases "... the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relations to it but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim."¹⁷

The Oedipal or castration complex involved the imposition of patriarchal authority; the (male) child unconsciously recognizes that the mother's lack of a penis signifies the power of male authority, patriarchy, the father, and, thus, his own weakness. Repression was imposed on children reared within a traditional family and this repression expresses the power of civilization, the successful effort to restrict libidinal gratification and curb destructive drives. For Freud, the underlying perversion was rooted in phantasy, which he conceived as the rebellion of the pleasure principle expressed as imagination and waged against the tyranny of the reality principle.¹⁸

In a 1927 piece, "Fetishism," Freud clarified his underlying assumption about the Oedipal complex, revealing certain analytic beliefs that were then commonly accepted:

... the horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute. Aversion from the real female genitals, which is never lacking in any fetishist, also remains as an indelible stigma of the repression that has taken place. One can now see what the fetish achieves and how it is enabled to persist. "

Looking deeper, he noted, the fetish "remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it."¹⁹ Almost as an after-thought, he cautioned: "I do not maintain that it is always possible to ascertain the determination of every fetish."²⁰

Object of desire

A quarter century after Freud and his fellow *fin de siècle* sexologists, the fetish -- and perversion in general -- was being re-conceptualized, normalized by the great post-WW-II consumer revolution. The pioneering empirical work of Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior of the Human Female* (1953), fundamentally changed American's understanding of sexuality. His studies were unprecedented because they were a "scientific" breakthrough; findings were based on approximately 18,000 interviews conducted between 1938 and 1953. The first volume on male sexuality is an 804-page scientific tome that to everyone's surprise, including Kinsey, became a national bestseller, quickly selling over 200,000 copies; it rose to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list in spite of the fact that the *Times* refused to carry advertisements for the book and failed to review it when it first appeared.

Kinsey scandalized readers with his un-ashamed, non-judgmental yet rigorously detailed consideration of the fetish, pornography and other "deviant" techniques of sexual pleasure:

"The use of literature and erotic pictures for stimulation during masturbation is not really common, and is largely confined to better educated individuals. Urethral insertions and other masochistic techniques, and anal stimulation and anal insertions occur only very occasionally. Sometimes devices which simulate the female genitalia may be used for masturbation, but they are rarely employed."

He concluded acknowledging, "Most males restrict themselves to a limited series of particular techniques to which they have been erotically conditioned." With regard to female sexuality, Kinsey noted: "What is commonly identified as pornography is literature and drawing which has the erotic arousal of the reader or observer as its deliberate and primary or sole objective."²¹

Other researchers extended Kinsey's findings, revealing the role of the fetish in the sex lives of Americans. One area given special consideration was commercial sex, particularly fetish play in heterosexual prostitution. Dr. Harry Benjamin, a noted endocrinologist who treated Christine Jorgensen, and R. E. L. Masters, found in their 1964 "definitive report," *Prostitution and Morality*, "many individual prostitutes and some brothels cater to almost the entire gamut of sexual deviations." They add:

"Men who wish to be beaten by women, or to beat them; men who wish to be bound by women, or to bind them; fetishists who desire partners wearing garments of rubber, leather, or fur; other fetishists who want partners in boots, in high heels, in masks, or partners with large breasts or long hair; transvestites, who want to have

intercourse while dressed as women – or, sometimes, simply to converse while dressed as women; exhibitionists and voyeurs; persons – coprophiles, urolagniacs, etc. – whose predilections involve urine and feces; necrophiles satisfied by a partner simulating a cadaver; these are by no means the only deviants among the prostitutes customers.”

Never losing sight of the commercial exchange at the heart of this, the oldest profession, these commentators report, “In general, the more extreme the deviation, and the more dangerous or painful for the prostitute, the higher is the fee demanded of the customer.”²²

Two sociologists, Charles Winick and Paul M. Kinsie, followed up in a 1971 study, *The Lively Commerce*, and found that prostitutes of the day utilized a variety of fetishes to please their clients. They reported “an active prostitute may be exposed to a wide range of ‘perversions,’” and enumerate some of them involving fetishism:

“... Some customers like to cry and wear makeup. Others enjoy sexual intercourse with a prostitute while she is tied to a bed or a chair. Still others attach a collar and leash to a prostitute and have her walk around the floor on all fours. Some customers engage in sexual intercourse with a prostitute a tergo, while she is eating from a dish or lapping milk from the floor. ...

“Some customers ask the woman to whip them, or want to whip her. They may wish to be tied up, or to tie her. Others bring specific items of clothing, often lingerie, for the woman to wear. Feathers, often ostrich feathers, and clothing made of red or black velvet are other items to adorn the woman. Some clients enjoy a woman nude except for furs, while others want her to wear nothing but long black gloves, or slippers. Biting, scratching, clawing, and punching are among the special requirements of some customers.”

In conclusion, the sociologists note, “The women who meet such

specialized requirements are likely to get extra pay. Among the most enthusiastic clients are sadists and masochists, who are likely to be older than the general clientele.”²³

The fetish was the central metaphor of postwar pornography. It was articulated in Irving Klaw’s photos and films, Samuel Roth’s publications and Bill Gaines’ comic books as well as the more risqué s/m magazines like *Bizarre*, *Exotique* and the *Caprice Catalog*. The most iconic representation of the ‘50s fetish scene was Bettie Page, photographed and filmed by Klaw, among others. Page was a long-forgotten iconic representation wonderfully brought to 21st century life in Mary Herron’s 2006 bio-pic, *The Notorious Bettie Page*. Richard Foster, author of *The Real Bettie Page*, claims that Klaw’s initiation into fetish photography, many featuring Page, was driven by a desire to pose models “to meet specific customer demands.” His photographs featured women -- and occasionally transvestites -- decked out in provocative outfits, including high-heel shoes, thigh-high boots, satin lingerie, leather costumes and even ropes, chains and whips. “For Irving Klaw,” Foster insists, “no fetish was too weird as long as it didn’t involve nudity, sexual acts, or physical harm to one of his models.”²⁴ Nevertheless, such representations were considered obscene, illegal.

Returning WW-II veterans fostered the underground gay male s/m and leather community that emerged during the late-‘40s and early-‘50s. During the postwar era, male (and some female) fetishists found a home in three often-overlapping venues – private parties, fetish bars and motorcycle clubs. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin reports, “sex parties had been critical to the development of leather social life at least as far back as the late forties. Before there were leather bars, there

were S/M parties."²⁵ She also notes, "The earliest gay leather bars and motorcycle clubs appears in the midfifties, in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago." Marlon Brando celebrated this new masculinity in two defining movies, *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

The fetish play offered by prostitutes and the gay leather s/m scenes were but two examples of the underground fetish culture. In the late-'50s, one of Kinsey's collaborators, Paul Gebhard, introduced the notion of four "degrees" or levels of fetishism to suggest "a continuum of intensities" in the erotic experience of fetish activity. Following Kinsey's diagnostic multi-staged model of male and female sexual identity, Gebhard's four fetish stages are:

- Level 1: A pre-fetish level in which a person shows slight preference exists for certain kinds of sex partners, sexual stimuli and activity.
- Level 2: A low-level fetish attraction in which a person shows a strong interest for certain kinds of sex partners, sexual stimuli and activity.
- Level 3: A moderate-level of fetish attraction in which a person requires specific stimuli are necessary for sexual arousal and sexual performance.
- Level 4: A high-level of fetish attraction in which specific stimuli *takes the place* of the sex partner.²⁶

Gebhard's analysis suggests that fetishism need not be a mental disorder, pathology. More so, it could be an alternative to the conventional "phallogocentric" model of sexuality and fetishism. Equally critical, Gebhard suggested that fetishism was not limited solely to males but could be engaged in by females as well.

John Money, founder of the Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic in 1965, wrote in his 1986 study, *Lovemaps*, that a fetish was "an object or charm endowed with magical or

supernatural power; an object or part of the body charged, for a particular person, with special sexueroetic power." He noted that this power could be experienced in more than visual or imaginary experiences, suggesting haptic (e.g., pressure, rubbing, touch) and olfactory (e.g., perfume, excrement) experiences as alternative forms of fetishistic indulgence.²⁷ With postwar prosperity, the sexual fetish was sensually enriched and extended to the whole body.

During the '70s, Michel Foucault lectured on philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley; he lived in San Francisco near Folsom Street in the South of Market (SoMa) district, the heart of the emerging s/m leather scene. In his study, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault wrote that "the psychiatrization of sexuality" rendered the fetish "the way in which instinct became fastened to an object in accordance with an individual's historical adherence and biological inadequacy." Personally, as James Miller reveals in his biography of Foucault, he "went shopping, stocking up on the leatherman's trade." Among the fetish items in Foucault's closet were a black leather jacket, chaps and cap as well as a "variety of 'toys': tit clamps, and handcuffs; hoods, gag, and blindfold; whips, paddles, and riding crops"²⁸ He was a gay man who explored the limits of s/m fetish culture and died of AIDS in 1986.

While Foucault prowled San Francisco's leather bars, fetish phantasies were spreading to other aspects of society. The fashion historian Valerie Steele notes in her wonderfully illustrated study, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, how three leading fashion designers of the '70s and '80s, Helmut Newton, Jean Paul Gaultier and Thierry Mugler, incorporated the fetish into images of assertive femininity.²⁹ They fetishized "kinky" undergarments (e.g., corsets,

bustieres), shoes (often with very high heels and ankle straps) and mid-thigh boots as cultural declarations of sexual freedom. They helped to glamorize not only the fetish but what Steele calls "second-skin materials" like leather, rubber and latex as an accouterment of the radical chic. The exaggerated s/m costumes that Bettie Page paraded for the 1950s underground fetishist set were going mainstream.

Reconceiving the fetish

The APA's changing definition of fetishism is detailed in five editions of the *DSM* published between 1952 and 2013; the changing definition marks out the evolution of the fetish from sin to the new normal. The *DSM-I* was issued in 1952, the first medical-scientific "bible" of moral order and included fetishism within the broader category of "sexual deviation." It stated: "This diagnosis is reserved for deviant sexuality which is not symptomatic of more extensive syndromes, such as schizophrenic and obsessional reactions." It then elaborated: "The term includes most of the cases formerly classed as 'psychopathic personality with pathologic sexuality.' The diagnosis will specify the type of the pathologic behavior, such as homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, mutilation)."³⁰

In 1959, Paul Friedman, writing in the *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, clarified the role of sexual deviation. "Broadly speaking," he reported, "we designate as sexual deviation or perversions any patterns of sexual behavior which differ from normal coitus and serve as major sources of sexual gratification rather than as foreplay to coital activity." For the psychiatric community, a deviation was a sexual gratification that is an end in itself and not merely foreplay

for procreative coitus. Fetishism was but one of the "special" psychopathological conditions of sexual deviation he identified. Other included coprophilia [feses fetish], exhibitionism, overt homosexuality, necrophilia, pedophilia, sadomasochism, transvestitism, voyeurism and zoophilia.³¹

Much has been written about the battle within psychiatry over homosexuality, one of the major sexual deviations. Ronald Bayer's 1986 study, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis*, remains the best single source, with others adding detail and texture.³² The *DSM-II* was published in 1968 and made a critical distinction with regard to sexual deviation: "This category is for individuals whose sexual interests are directed primarily toward objects other than people of the opposite sex, toward sexual acts not usually associated with coitus, or toward coitus performed under bizarre circumstances as in necrophilia, pedophilia, sexual sadism, and fetishism." It adds: "This diagnosis is not appropriate for individuals who perform deviant sexual acts because normal sexual objects are not available to them."³³ The release of the *DSM-II* coincided with the emergence of the modern gay rights movement that began inauspiciously with the leafleting of the 1968 American Medical Association (AMA) convention and, only a year later, culminated in the Stonewall riot.

Over a period of 18 years, Robert Spitzer, MD, led the battle within the APA to reclassify homosexuality. In 1973, the same year the Supreme Court legalized a woman's right to an abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, the APA's Board of Trustees voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. It formally revised the *DSM-III* in 1980 and released the *DSM-III-R* in 1986 that finally dropped

homosexuality as a medical disorder. The *DSM-III-R* appeared in the midst of the AIDS crisis when homosexuality was synonymous with death. It reclassified homosexuality as a "sexual disorder not otherwise classified" if accompanied by serious distress. And what went for homosexuality applied equally to other previously identified perversions like fetishism.³⁴

The *DSM-III* reconceived sexual deviation as a psychosexual disorder within one of three categories: (i) gender identity disorders (e.g., transvestism), (ii) psychosexual dysfunctions (e.g., ego-dystonic homosexuality) and (iii) paraphilias. The third category applied to atypical or abnormal behaviors that can potentially involve or lead to mental illness, but do not constitute an illness in and of itself. It included fetishism as well as zoophilia, pedophilia, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual masochism and sexual sadism.* Most noticeable, the *DSM-III* took an ambiguous stand with regard to people who engage in this class of sexualized behavior: "Frequently these individuals assert that the behavior causes them no distress and that their only problem is the reaction of others to their behavior. Others admit to guilt, shame, and depression at having to engage in an unusual sexual activity that is socially unacceptable." Turning to fetishism, it specified two diagnostic criteria:

A. The use of nonliving objects (fetishes) is a repeatedly preferred or exclusive method of achieving sexual excitement

B. The fetishes are not limited to articles of female clothing used in cross-dressing (Transvestism) or to

* In an interview, Spitzer acknowledged that the reason the Nomenclature Committee adopted the term "paraphelia" for the *DSM-III* was that "nobody knew what it meant." [DR interview, 2005]

objects designed to be used for the purpose of sexual stimulation (e.g., vibrator).

It noted, "The essential feature is the use of nonliving objects (fetishes) as a repeatedly preferred or exclusive method of achieving sexual excitement." It also identified a host of fetish objects ranging from female undergarments, shoes and boots to parts of the human body (e.g., hair or nails), but separated such objects from the female clothing associated with transvestism.

The APA's removal of homosexuality from its list of mental disorders led to resolutions opposing discrimination of homosexuals from the AMA, American Psychological Association and American Bar Association as well as the Society of Friends, Lutheran Church and National Council of Churches. Cities across the country passed laws explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. Perhaps most important, sodomy laws relating to homosexuality were dropped in more than a dozen states.^{*35} The APA's revision contributed to the social acceptance of homosexuality, fetishism and other sexual deviations.

No change in the meaning of the fetish and other perversions, especially homosexuality, was more significant than that proposed by those seeking to treat such deviant conditions, most notably psychology, psychiatry and medical professions. Samantha Allen, in an invaluable "annotated bibliography" of the Kinsey Institute's

* The latest *DSM-V* (2013) includes "fetishistic disorder" within the category of "paraphilic disorders" that exhibitionistic disorder, frotteuristic disorder, pedophilic disorder, sexual masochism disorder, sexual sadism disorder, transvestic disorder, and voyeuristic disorder. <http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/Paraphilic%20Disorders%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

holdings on sexual fetishism, found that between the 1950s and '70s, clinicians used a variety of techniques to treat fetishists. They included: relaxation procedures [Lazarus]; "multiple" therapies [Chambers]; "behavioral therapy" [Lambley]; "scathing verbal attacks pertaining to ... fetishistic behavior" [Cooper]; "hypnotherapy" [McSweeney], "hypnotic suggestion" [Salfield] and "hypnotic suggestion to induce nausea" [Glick]; a variety of drugs, including antidepressants, sedatives, anticonvulsants [Ball], apomorphine (a dopamine that induced nausea and vomiting) "while listening to a tape he (the patient) had made the night before in which he "soliloquized on the special delights of his fetishism [Clark] and which produced "ringing sounds in the head, nausea, and sometimes vomiting" [Stryzewsky]; and electroshock, with shocks set "10 volts higher than the subject's reported upper threshold" [Bond] and another involving "41 shock sessions" over "14 weeks of treatment" [Kushner]. No lobotomies appear to have been performed and Allen found that some clinicians reported success in stopping a client's fetishist's behavior.³⁶

The sexual commodity

Marx did not consider the sexual object in the chapter of *Capital*, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Therein." He -- and Frederick Engels -- devoted very little attention in their writings to sexuality. Very much men of the mid-19th century, they each had complex sex lives but devoted little attention to it as a critical subject in study. They recognized that under capitalism, a woman's primary role was a biological "reproducer," not, like a male worker, as a commodity "producer"; therefore, women occupied subordinate positions within the nuclear family and bourgeois society.

However, the line separating wage and nonwage labor is porous. Without acknowledging the tyranny of patriarchy, Marx and Engels understood that female prostitution was one of the most egregious forms of wage labor. All wage labor involves selling one's labor power, as both body and mind, but none but prostitution involves selling a sexual engagement, perhaps the most intimate human experience. More so, they recognized that female prostitution was a metaphor of the tyranny of social relations under capitalism: All workers engage in prostitution. Marx, having read de Brosses' *On The Cult of Fetish Gods*, called the social fantasy of capitalist exchange, the "Fetishism of commodities." He wrote, "So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities." Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), provocatively asks: "[C]an prostitution disappear without dragging monogamy with it into the abyss?"³⁷

In the wake of the Great War, the Bolshevik Revolution and the defeat of postwar worker uprisings throughout Europe, most notably in Germany, some Marxists began to raise questions about what had -- and had not -- taken place. Why had the proletariat backed an imperialist war? Why had a revolution succeeded in Russia, a non-industrial country, but failed in countries with a more advanced proletariat? Was the "scientific" distinction between the economic "base" and the socio-political "superstructure" adequate to address the crisis Europe faced? Was there something wrong, inadequate, with the dominant, positivistic form of orthodox Marxism victorious in the Soviet Union?

Two very different tendencies within the broad non-orthodox or reformist Marxist tradition emerged. One was exemplified by more traditional but non-economistic Marxists, notably Rosa Luxemburg, György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci. The other included theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, many deeply influenced by Freud; some had read him (e.g., Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse), others had been psychoanalyzed (e.g., Max Horkheimer) and still others were trained psychoanalysts (e.g., Wilhelm Reich and Eric Fromm). Collectively, these two very different tendencies added a new lexicon to traditional economistic Marxism, including concepts like consciousness, hegemony, character structure, daily life, alienation, repressive tolerance and erotic de-sexualization. Marxism has never been the same.

The concept of "consciousness" was not uncommon to late-19th century radicals. Engels invoked it in 1895, "The time of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses is past." Rosa Luxemburg considered it before she was killed by Social Democrats in 1919 to halt the post-WW-I German workers uprising. She wrote: "The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of the historical process comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historical process." She also noted that the "repression" of "ordinary natural desires" contributed to social tyranny.³⁸

Lukács and Gramsci, independently, sought to reconceive the notion of consciousness. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács extended Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism to what he identified as "false consciousness." He

argued that the economic dimensions of exchange had spread to all aspect of personal and social relations, whether involving relations with oneself, with other people or, ultimately, between each individual and society as a whole, politics. He dubbed this process "reification," turning everything human into a commodity, an object of exchange. Gramsci devoted a small section of *The Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935) to the "phantasm of the intellect, a fetish." He identified "hegemony" as "a residue of Catholic transcendentalism and of the old paternalistic regimes. ... [And] common to a series of organisms, from the state to the nation to political parties, etc."³⁹ Capitalist hegemony falsified social relations, whether in terms of culture (i.e., religion) or politics (i.e., the state). Contemporary theorists, like Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari, continue to revise Marxism in term of subjectivity and the commodity fetish.⁴⁰

In *The Dialectical Imagination*, Martin Jay notes, "... it is difficult to appreciate the audacity of the first theorists who proposed the unnatural marriage of Freud and Marx."⁴¹ In the early 1920s, Frankfurt theorists began to integrate Freudian analysis and a Marxists critique into an evolving notion of "critical theory." As Jay notes, "it [Freudian theory] was also a marker of the Institute's desire to leave the traditional Marxist straitjacket behind."⁴² With the Nazi triumph, many associated with the Frankfurt School fled to the U.S., but some, like Benjamin, never made it. In Germany and the U.S., the survivors formulated a critique not merely of fascism and the authoritarian personality that fostered it, but of the tyranny of the emerging postwar consumer capitalism, including the new moral order based on repressive sexual tolerance.

In the 1920s, Freud and other early founders of the then-fledgling discipline of psychoanalysis saw Reich as a promising analyst. In 1933, as the Nazis were about to seize state power, Reich published *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, one of the earliest works seeking to integrate the insights of Freud and Marx. He argued, "By including the discoveries of [Freudian] psychoanalysis, [Marxist] sociology reaches a higher level and becomes better able to comprehend reality because, finally, it includes a knowledge of human [character] structure." Fascism was the savagery attacked to traditional child-rearing practices; Reich argued it was an incubator of authoritarian tyranny, the fostering of patriarchy and class distinctions. He also assailed the inculcation of "libidinous" militarism reflected in "the mass-psychological effects of a uniform and of rhythmically perfect parades." He pointed out that "*the swastika was originally a sexual symbol*" (i.e., two intertwined human bodies) and, while it didn't explain the rise of Nazism, it served as a "potent stimulant." Perhaps most radical, after visiting post-revolutionary Russia, Reich questioned Lenin's theories regarding the dictatorship of the proletariat and the withering away of the state.⁴³

Benjamin extended Marx's concept of the fetishism of commodities to the commodification of all aspects of daily life. In his famous article, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he recognized that the photography, and more so the moving picture that followed, served as the ideological glue that fostered the unconscious visual imagination of modern consumer capitalism.⁴⁴ In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," he identified elements of the fetishistic character of the emerging commodity consumerism, including the arcades (precursors of department stores), world's fairs and exhibitions as

well as fashion and advertising. He developed these themes in his great, unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*. As he noted, "Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image therefore a dream image." And he added, "Such an image is presented by pure commodity: as fetish."⁴⁵ In one section, "Prostitution, Gambling," he observes, "On the dialectical function of money in prostitution. It buys pleasure and, at the same time, becomes the expression of shame." He also noted, "Love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity."⁴⁶

Fromm was trained as a psychoanalyst in Berlin and associated with the Institute for about a decade. As Jay notes, he introduced the "use of psychoanalytic mechanisms as the mediating concepts between individual and society"⁴⁷ He gradually broke with Institute and Freudianism to forge a more humanistic – "existential" – social psychology. Nevertheless, he long argued that Marx had a hidden theory of psychology, what he called "dynamic psychology," that was rooted in the concept of alienation. Fully informed of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* and *Grundrisse*, Fromm wrote in 1970, "... Marx visualized the pathology of normalcy, the crippledness of the – statistically – normal man, the loss of himself, the loss of his human substance." He elaborated, "Thus Marx speaks of the possibility that man may 'become lost' in the object if the object has not become a human object." Fromm insisted that such alienation was the basis "for a new and original concept of neurosis."⁴⁸

In 1955, Marcuse published the most utopian, visionary work of the postwar era, *Eros and Civilization*.⁴⁹ He combined Freud's psychoanalytic analysis and Marx's social critique with Heidegger's phenomenological method

to fashion a work that celebrates Eros, the inherent radicality of free, consensual libido within each person and encouraged by a humane society. "In a repressive order, which enforces the equation between normal, socially useful, and good," he argued, "the manifestations of pleasure for its own sake must appear as *fleurs du mal*." For those who rebelled against this tyranny, they bore a heavy burden: "The full force of civilized morality was mobilized against the use of the body as mere objects, means, instruments of pleasure; such reification was tabooed and remained the ill-reputed privilege of whores, degenerates and perverts. The tyranny of civilization is the triumph of a genitally-dominant sexuality, a sexuality that de-eroticizes a fully human experience of pleasure."⁵⁰ Marcuse argued that modern society harnessed sexuality, a primordial force of human nature, to further consumer capitalism.

In a 1963 essay, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," Adorno picked up Marcuse's critique of repression tolerance inherent in advanced capitalism and warned, "... sexual liberation in contemporary society is mere illusion." He argued that capitalism was fostering "a desexualization of sexuality itself. Pleasure that is either kept cornered or accepted with smiling complaisance is no longer pleasure at all...." He added, "Whereas sexuality has been integrated, that which cannot be integrated, the actual spiciness of sex, continues to be detested by society." He concludes most emphatically, "Unmutilated, unrepressed sex in itself does not do any harm to anyone."⁵¹

The new normal

The psychiatrist Robert Stoller once famously observed, "A fetish is a story masquerading as an object."⁵² This has never been truer than today. Reframing Stoller's assertion, one can

ask whether the fetish's threat that so absorbed Freud and others sexologists over the last century was nothing but an object masquerading as a story, a social fiction they refused to acknowledge? Did the fetish symbolize a personal rebellion, the acting out against the repression inflicted by the patriarchal family and the authoritarian society? Looking back, it seems that underlying yesteryear's analyses of the fetish -- and the more general notion of perversion, sexual deviation -- was an unstated prejudice, an unacknowledged fear. Many traditional sex researchers, along with others in authority, shared a perception that the fetish represented a threat to moral order. As capitalist society faced the crisis of modernization, those in authority targeted the fetish as part of an effort to regulate intimate private and social sexual-related behavior they found unacceptable.

Once-threatening sexual perversions of old persist in continuing incidences of pedophilia, rape, sex trafficking and the inflicting of severe personal harm like SDT/AIDS infections. But many of the once-threatening sexual perversions of old have lost their bite. They've been transformed into just another personal lifestyle indulgences, expressions of an "open," "healthy" sex culture. In this process, the range of acceptable sexual practices engaged in as "normal" has been considerably expanded, allowing sexual adventurers, let alone ordinary adults and age-appropriate youths, to enjoy a fuller pallet of sexual pleasures.

The shift in the moral order from sin to the new normal is most evident in the transformation of oral sex and the use of sex toys. Oral sex was once considered a shameful activity but, in the early-21st century, it is a commonly engaged in practice; many young people don't consider it as having sex.⁵³ The use of sexual paraphernalia among consenting

adults is widespread; it is less threatening, both personally and socially, than anytime in American history. This change illustrates the adoption of a new moral order, one based on postmodern notion of sexual tolerance.

Nevertheless, some people -- mostly men, but in declining numbers -- continue to be arrested for engaging in illegal fetishistic misconduct. In Northridge, CA, a skating rink employee was arrested as a foot fetishist for kissing the feet of youthful customers; in Houston, TX, a woman was convicted of creating and distributing videos depicting the torture and killing of puppies, chickens and kittens; in New York, a former police officer, dubbed the "Cannibal Cop," was accused of plotting to kidnap, kill and eat young women, including his wife.

In its annual crime reports, the FBI does not specify the number of people arrested for illegal fetishistic behavior. It does, however, note that sexually motivated murders are often due to "a number of unconventional sexual acts including fetish behaviors and paraphilias. These include fetishism, postmortem mutilation, foreign object penetration, sexual sadism, necrophilia, cannibalism, and vampirism." It seems impossible to determine the number of people who visit a psychiatrist, psychologist or therapist for treatment of an obsession involving a private fetish or other perversion.⁵⁴

Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, authors of *Female Fetishism*, argue that the secret of the fetish for both Marx and Freud lies not in the commodity, the object or its story, but in its mysterious power of "disavowal," the ability to deny the essential human relation at the heart of the fetishistic experience. For Marx, denial was rooted in exchange, the falsification of

a social relation between a producer (i.e., the subject and the product) and the consumer (i.e., the object of purchase), between use value and exchange value. This falsification is institutionalized as a socially shared quasi-religious belief system, capitalism. For Freud, disavowal was rooted in a social relation of authority, between parent and child; the subject (i.e., boy) succumbs to patriarchal tyranny rooted in the falsification of a traumatic perception, the castration complex, his mother's lack of a penis. Laura Mulvey notes that the fetish's role in disavowal is like "a red flag, symptomatically signaling a site of psychic pain."⁵⁵ Denial involves the substitution of a sexualized object, the fetish, for patriarchal repression; this misperception is institutionalized as civilization.⁵⁶ These twin forms of denial -- of economic exploitation and psychological tyranny -- defined social and sexual life during capitalism's modern era.

The rise of the 2nd-wave women's movement during capitalism's early-postmodern era was a critical factor in the commodification of adult sex and the transformation of the fetish. Susan Buck-Morss, the noted Benjamin scholar, argues, "Sexual liberation for women under capitalism has had the night-mare effect of 'freeing' all women to be sexual objects (not subjects). It must be admitted that women have collaborated actively in this process."⁵⁷ Gamman and Makinen note, "Arguing that women can and do practice fetishism thus becomes a way of challenging the psychoanalytic model of sexuality. It is also a way of showing how this existing model is in fact simply a way of reinforcing phallogentric value." Drawing on the works of radical feminist scholars like Luce Irigaray and Sara Kofman, they ask: "If women are allowed to fetishize, then the castration complex cannot be the only explanation --

something else must be occurring as well, or instead. In trying to conceptualize this 'something else,' a new and positive construction of female sexuality comes into play."⁵⁸ Like all historical dialectics, sexual progress comes with its negation.

Post-WW-II consumer capitalism transformed the body and sexuality into commodities. The culture of consumer indulgence was promoted through the cultivation of what Freud called "phantasy," the creative, erotic imagination that configures sexual perversion and is "subordinated to the pleasure principle alone."⁵⁹ It reverberates in the seductive lure of fashion and makeup, advertising, movies and television, newspapers and magazines, and an endless stream of online websites disseminate ever-increasing eroticized notions of postmodern life. Nothing more symbolizes this development than the eroticization of the female body and, most troubling, that of younger and younger girls. In this process, the self became a commodity, complicit in its own exploitation; people know how to function in the marketplace, both as seller of one's self as a product and as a shrewd consumer, a self-regulating buyer.

A half-a-century ago, Marcuse glimpsed the coming transformation of capitalism and sought to apply a radical Marx-Freud analysis to this unstoppable development. In *One Dimensional Man* (1964), he warned: "The range of socially permissible and desirable satisfaction is greatly enlarged, but through this process, the Pleasure Principle is reduced -- deprived of the claims which are irreconcilable with the established society." Going further, he foresaw the future of sexual morality as repressive tolerance: "Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission."⁶⁰ Although Marcuse never considered the fetish, the development he foresaw was most

evident in its transformation from a pathological perversion, a once dreaded threat to self-hood and society, into a lifestyle indulgence.⁶¹

A half-century later, Marcuse's warning has become the 21st century new normal. As the fetish became the sex toy, once-forbidden sex practices -- like homosexuality, pornography, trans-sexuality and prostitution -- lost most of their shame and criminality, and became profitable businesses. This process fashioned a world where, among consenting adults, "everything goes" -- people can sexually do whatever they want if it's voluntary, safe and private.

This new sexual culture raises a profound question: does the anything-goes "permissiveness" among rational, age-appropriate people signal a new era of American sexual culture? More troubling, has this new sexual culture become less erotic, thus becoming the banality of postmodern sex? For centuries the unacceptable, the illicit, the perverse has set the boundary of pleasure. What happens when these prohibitions are lifted and anything goes?

Faced with the "normalization" of the once sinful into pleasurable banality, people nevertheless keep pushing the limits of sexual pleasure. Is this new sexual culture fashioning something best describe as "the erotic junky"? Is s/he epitomized by, for example, the apparent popularity of sex tourism, the revival of "swinging" and innovations in technologically mediated sexual experiences exemplified by VR porn?

Many resist the pull of the new normal, a unique combination of marketplace capitalism and progressive secular values. Christian moralists and some Freudians still fear sexual perversions as threats to the deeply held belief that the true, sole, purpose of sex is to fulfill the biological requirement of

procreation. However, what happens when the requirements of procreation are contained through effective birth control and the quality of life improves as people live longer, healthier lives? Postmodern capitalism integrates sexuality as an active force into daily commercial and personal life; today, every purchase, every experience, seeks to be a sexual turn-on.

As Marcuse warned, "This society turns everything it touches into a potential source of progress and of exploitation, of drudgery and satisfaction, of freedom and of oppression. Sexuality is no exception." And so too is the fetish. Welcome to the new normal.

Notes

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⁵⁶ Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York: NYU Press, 1994), pp. 33, 43, 44-46.

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⁶⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 78.

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