

# H-Net Reviews

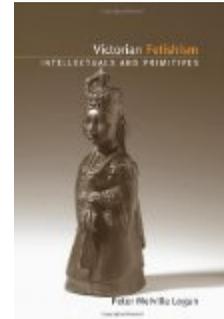
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Melville Logan. *Victorian Fetishism: Intellectuals and Primitives*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. xi + 206 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7661-1.

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## Victorian Culture and Its Discontents

During the Victorian era, notions of civilization helped shape the nature and character of intellectual life, as typified by the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition, which glorified British accomplishments in technology, industry, and imperial expansion. The displays themselves not only highlighted artifacts of material progress, but also were ordered in such a way as to give the viewer a sense of each nation's relative level of development: they passed successively from raw materials to machinery, manufactures, and finally the fine arts. The audiences who thronged to the show took great pride in the achievements of their nation's accomplishments, seeing themselves as part of the vanguard of cultural development. An important strand of thought among Victorian intellectuals held that the model of civilization embodied by the Crystal Palace was grounded in scientific observations and that an examination of primitive peoples could expose universal truths about the nature of humanity. The beliefs of less advanced cultures, particularly their investiture of material objects or fetishes with spiritual significance, were seen as providing both a window into the minds of non-European peoples and a convenient justification for the superiority of those observing them. Peter Melville Logan's *Victorian Fetishism* carefully traces the nature of this debate about "unculture" between 1850 and the early 1900s, providing an insightful analysis of how the figure of the fetish came to occupy (and lose) a privileged place in discussions concerning civilization and religious belief.

Modern references to fetishes typically either evoke

Karl Marx's notion of a commodity fetish or Sigmund Freud's more sexualized variant, but Logan's text focuses on the now unfashionable anthropological sense of the term in order to explore the relativistic relationship between culture and primitivism. Scholars of Victorian notions of civilization have explored the role of imperial expansion in shaping how the British viewed their own intellectual advances, especially when compared to peoples who were believed to be lagging. The study of Victorian images of supposedly primitive peoples, such as the notorious Pears' soap advertisements, reveal a great deal about how the British took pride in their own advances, but Logan suggests that there must be a reconsideration of "unculture" as well. From this vantage, the study of how Victorians understood and explained spiritual fetishes provides a particularly useful approach. Logan claims that the meaning attributed to fetishes by Victorian thinkers was part of a problem of representation, embodied in a triangular relationship, which included the fetish object, the primitive, and the observer. By tracing this "fetish dialectic," Logan explores how Victorian writers, such as Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and Edward B. Tylor, "exposed fetishism as the absence of culture while employing it in defining their own versions of culture" (p. 13). At the heart of Logan's argument is the contention that the constellation of ideas that accumulated around Victorian perceptions of fetishes allowed these thinkers to delegitimize the cultural development of these "primitives" and provided a justification for their visions of future progress.

Logan begins his analysis by recounting the familiar history of the first use of the term “fetish” by Portuguese traders exploring West Africa and comparing their understanding of this concept with the materialism of classical Epicureanism. According to Logan, Epicureans, such as Lucretius, explored the major components of the modern understanding of how fetishes worked long before the term became a staple of Enlightenment and Victorian discourse. In the classical world, these materialists argued that the perceptions of the earliest humans were limited to the concrete world of what they could see and experience. This situation continued until the development of language allowed for the use of abstraction, which in turn led these primitives to anthropomorphize their surroundings through a process of psychological projection. As human understanding of the world further evolved, Lucretius held out the prospect of a future state grounded in rationality that would cast aside these primitive superstitions. According to Logan, the three-stage view of historical progress embedded in the works of the Epicureans was later repeated during the Enlightenment, where such thinkers as Bernard de Bouvier de Fontanelle and Giambattista Vico constructed similar descriptions of how civilization advanced from primitive materialism to the more exalted abstractions of their contemporaries. Following the traditional accounts of the history of anthropology, Logan identifies Charles de Brosses as playing a critical role in popularizing how the notion of the primitive fetish could explain a uniform sequence of culture through which all peoples passed and to draw a parallel between the psychology of primitives and young children. These insights were then used to greatest effect by Auguste Comte, whose positivism was predicated on this vision of human development.

While describing the evolution of British notions of civilization during the nineteenth century, Logan argues that “the path from the Enlightenment to Victorian anthropology was through Comte” (p. 30). In his analysis of religion and culture, Comte melded the Baron de Montesquieu’s scientific study of society as a sequence of three stages with the Marquis de Condorcet’s belief in human progress to construct the foundation for his study of sociology. Even more important for Logan’s study, Comte’s examination of primitive fetishism provided a convenient overview of Enlightenment ideas of early religion and the civilizing process for his audience on both sides of the English Channel. Although the long delays between the publication of the six volumes of his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42) led to Comte’s work suffering from benign neglect in his native France, his recep-

tion in Britain was much more enthusiastic. J. S. Mill’s *System of Logic* (1843) was heavily indebted to Comte, and in 1843 Harriet Martineau published an abridged translation of his writings that helped popularize his thought. Logan painstakingly traces the early reviews of Comte’s philosophy, contending that Victorian intellectuals were quite familiar with positivism by the end of the 1850s and that his analysis of primitive fetishes provided a touchstone for discussions of early religion among his supporters and critics.

Logan’s work in tracing the influence of Comte on Victorian thinkers is admirable, but it does elide other possible sources of the three-stage view of historical development that became prominent during this period. For instance, Scottish Enlightenment writers, such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and William Robertson, pioneered the use of stadial history to explain similarities and differences across cultures. While the Scots saw these discrepancies as a function of economic and material forces, Logan is more concerned with how anthropological models privileged religious practices; still, the core movement in each case was the civilizing process itself. Furthermore, recent research has suggested that the Scottish Enlightenment may have played a key role in the origins of sociology and Comte himself lauded the Scots for many of his insights concerning the scientific study of society. Despite the influence of the Scottish model of cultural development on later thought, Logan’s analysis eschews delving into the influence thinkers north of the Tweed had on Victorian intellectuals in favor of emphasizing Comte’s contributions. While Comte’s impact on Victorian notions of the fetish was important, locating his work within this larger context could have enhanced Logan’s argument.

One of the strengths of Logan’s text is his close reading and analysis of Victorian writers, starting with Arnold. While Arnold was an outspoken critic of positivism, Logan contends that he adopted aspects of Comte’s system, particularly his theory of the primitive fetish, into his analysis of Victorian society. Throughout his works, but especially in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold decried the English habit of worshiping a variety of “false gods” and represented the nation as “a society of the fetish” (p. 48). According to Logan, Arnold adapted Comte’s notion of the primitive fetish to the British case, critiquing its culture as being inclined to blindly accept two seemingly contradictory forms of knowledge: conventional wisdom and novelty. In either case, Arnold decried the British tendency to fetishize ideas as though they had concrete form. He was particularly wary of the

reification of notions of freedom, as expressed by the ideology of free trade that dominated Victorian commercialism. Although Arnold suggested that the solution to this problem was to encourage the free play of ideas, Logan astutely observes that this approach was marred by the incongruity of using one vision of “freedom” to attack another. As a result, Logan claims that Arnold should be seen as an example of Victorian cultural values, rather than unreflectively assumed to be a critic of them.

While Arnold may have been skeptical of positivism, his contemporary Eliot was much more receptive to Comte’s analysis. Not only did her partner George Lewes publish a collection of Comte’s essays in 1853, but her letters from the time indicate a close familiarity with Mill’s *System of Logic*. Despite their apparent dissimilarity, Logan argues that Eliot and Arnold shared a fundamental ambivalence toward fetishism. Whereas Arnold’s abstract theories of culture tended toward the polemic, Eliot’s use of realism in her novels “necessarily relied on fetishism to accomplish its anti-fetishistic goals” (p. 69). Logan argues that Eliot’s novels blended Comte’s positivism with the insights of German higher criticism to provide a critique of religious fetishism in the modern world. After carefully outlining the thought of Ludwig Feuerbach, Logan stresses how Eliot incorporated his analysis of anthropologic projection in her novels. According to this account, her theory of realism was seen as an antidote to religious fetishism, since the sum total of details embedded in such works of art as *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) could take on a transformational power that would perform a social function otherwise unattainable. Through this fusion of object and spirit, Logan claims that Eliot found a solution to the problem of fictional representation that allowed her to engage with primitive fetishism as a domestic issue and as an aesthetic device.

After considering how cultural critics and novelists viewed the role of the fetish, Logan examines one of the leading Victorian anthropologists, Tylor, in order to illustrate the problematic relationship between notions of the fetish and culture during this period. Unlike later anthropologists who collected data with the goal of understanding multiple cultures, Tylor believed that all humanity was part of a single culture and that apparent differences between peoples stemmed from their relative place along a temporal continuum. Tylor drew on Comte’s three-stage view of history to argue that all peoples passed from savagery to barbarism, before eventually reaching civilization. Logan stresses the role of language in Tylor’s work, highlighting how his conceptualization of historical development was predicated on linguistic analy-

sis rather than field experience. As humans passed from one stage to the next, Tylor argued that some cultural elements persisted as fetishes and that these contained clues as to the nature of earlier states of being. Logan contends that Tylor privileged the study of these myths and that eventually “the interpretation of cultural survivals became the royal road to the primitive mind” (p. 103). In this manner, Tylor’s anthropology collapsed the distinction between the study of primitive and modern culture, a tactic that was also used by the final group of thinkers examined by Logan, the fin-de-siècle psychologists.

Logan begins his account of psychological fetishism by briefly recounting the history of its usage in sexual matters by Alfred Binet and Cesar Lombroso. Both thinkers questioned the mechanism through which humans invested objects with special powers and linked this process to issues of degeneration. As Logan points out, this marked an important shift in the nature of Victorian writing about fetishism. Previous writers had assumed that the fetish was a characteristic of primitive culture, but for Binet it was seen as a result of an overcivilized environment. According to this view, culture degenerates over the course of successive generations, which meant that the highest levels of civilization would eventually approximate the most primitive. Early sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, adapted these insights to explain the nature of sexual monomania by drawing a parallel between religious and erotic fetishes. Identifying monogamous heterosexuality as the norm, Krafft-Ebing contended that the pathological form of fetishism was inherited and was evidence of a reversion to a more primitive state. Logan claims that Freud first incorporated these views into his theory of sexuality, until he moved beyond his predecessors and began to describe the fetish as a psychological symbol linked to his theory of the split ego. In terms of Logan’s larger argument, Freud’s work brings him back to the beginning. The newly self-aware patients that Freud treated were seen as embodying the roles of both the worshiper of the fetish and the critic, erasing the distinction between the savage and the civilized with one fell stroke.

In the end, Logan strives to disentangle the figure of the fetish from the language of power and culture during the Victorian period. His careful explication of the fetish triangle of interpretation was premised on “the underlying ability to define someone else as guilty of overvaluation” (p. 135). Rather than accepting the traditional belief that fetishism is a characteristic of primitive society and thus the antithesis of culture, Logan skillfully shows how this very assumption was the product of Vic-

torian culture itself. The sexualization of the fetish in the twentieth century resulted in a dramatic shift in this discourse, redefining the fetish as a symptom of overcivilization rather than its absence. Nonetheless, Logan forcefully argues that knowledge of this earlier incarnation of the fetish is essential for understanding Victorian debates about culture and society.

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