

Hair as an Indicator of Social Status

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Value is a tricky word. On the one hand, a valuable product is desirable and appropriate, something that can be measured and compared to other products. On the other hand, two different products may have equal value. These two apparently conflicting usages of the word *value* embody the differing social and cultural attitudes to hair. On the one hand, one hair type is the same as another as far as functionality and uses. On the other hand, we've been taught that there is hair that is more prestigious, more desirable, better. In *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof*, Karl Marx defines commodities as raw materials that have been treated, changed and improved through human labor.¹ Hair is both a raw material and a commodity. It is produced by the person growing it on his or her body, making that person a type of "producer". But it may also be treated, modified and made more valuable, thus becoming a "commodity". In capitalist societies, commodities and their market value reflect the complex balance of power between various populations. The value of natural hair, or the treated hair on our heads (or bodies), denotes our status in the society in which we live.

Compared to other body parts, hair is unique in that it may be severed from the body, treated or changed with relatively little pain. It is one of the easiest physical attributes to modify or redesign, which has made it the most widely treated human commodity and a highly significant social indicator. All cultures treat hair in one way or another, and as Kobena Mercer has said, hair is "almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally worked upon by human hands... making it the medium of significant statements about self."² Since hair grows continually, it requires constant care and cannot be ignored as one may ignore other body parts. We set aside a certain time in our daily routine for hair-care, and we usually have well-defined demands regarding the "works of art" crowning our heads or spread along other parts of our bodies. This "discipline" turns hair into a political statement, and as Michel Foucault puts it, "a 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being

¹ Marx, Carl *Capital, The Process of Capitalist Production*, translated from the 4th edition, by Eden¹ and Cedar Paul, international Publishers, N.Y., 1929

² Mercer, Kobena "Black Hairstyle/Politics" in: Martha Gever, Trinh Minh-ha T. & West Cornel, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, M.I.T. Press, Mass, 1990

born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies." ³

Hair as a raw material may be divided into several categories:

- Men's hair and women's hair – generally differentiated by its whereabouts on the body
- Ethnicity – differences of color and texture
- Head hair or body hair
- Age – the hair of children, adults or the elderly

Foucault's "mechanics of power" or Marx's "relationships between producers" are defined by the relationships between various types of hair. Producers – in this case human beings, are valued according to their hair type, and their social standing may be ascertained by others through their hair. In Marxist terms, valuation of hair allows individuals a tangible and three-dimensional perception of their relationships. The scale ranges between "good" hair – hair that is situated solely in the "right" places on the body and has the "right" color and texture, and "bad" hair, which must be cut, plucked, dyed, straightened, curled or concealed.

Cultures differ greatly as to the amount of work they devote to hair care, and the human labor invested in attempts at modifying "bad" hair may provide a measure of a population's low self esteem, inferiority or inequality. In most societies, more time and effort are expended on women's hair than on men's, to the point that it has become a fetish valued much more than its actual worth. However, much effort also goes toward removing extraneous hair, as well as implantations or additions in cases of hair loss. Hair care or removal is an attempt to make us more similar to the contemporary ideal of beauty.

In absolute terms, the real value of one hair type is no different from any other; all hair types fulfill the same natural functions. The "status" of differing hair types is a social phenomenon, defined by Marx as commodity fetishism. Society projects class

³ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books. N.Y. 1979

differences on to the commodities produced by the subgroups within a population; thus a commodity produced by the dominant culture or class becomes a fetish imbued with inner value that is not always commensurate with its real value. Stylish or desirable hair is the hair type of the dominant culture and this hair type becomes a fetish. As most of the population is not born with the right hair, it makes up for its lacks through modifications and additions, encouraged by advertising, women's magazines and fashion designers, industries highly invested in the hair market.

Hair as a sexual fetish

As opposed to the Marxist definition of a fetish as a commodity inhered with value, Sigmund Freud defines the term as a part of the body or an article of clothing that has sexual connotations. In his 1927 article "Fetishism",⁴ Freud relates to the sexual value of hair and other parts of the human body. According to Freud, sexual fetishes are a replacement for the phallus "lacking" in women. Why has hair become one of the most significant sexual fetishes associated with the human body? One explanation may be related to the fact that the female sexual organs appear externally as a tangle of hair, which imbues hair with sexual associations. Luce Irigaray⁵ posits that the Marxist commodity fetish and the Freudian sexual fetish are united in the female body, and her phrase "woman on the commodity market" reflects the class value of women's bodies as an expression of men's values. "The exchange of passion," she states, "is men's business."

The Barbie doll, one of the most popular products on the market, first produced in 1959 by the American company Mattel, was almost an exact replica of Bild Lilli, a German sex doll designed to resemble a prostitute and widely marketed in Europe during the post-war years.⁶ Girls from all corners of the world have been brushing Barbie/Lilli's abundant blonde hair for the past fifty years, and when they grow up they dye their hair blonde in emulation of the doll. Does Barbie's hair have real "value"? Are women who try to look like her really more "valuable"? The idealization of Barbie's hair places every woman in danger of becoming "lacking" at some point in her life, as comparison to Barbie demonstrates her distance from the feminine ideal.

⁴ Freud, Sigmund *On Sexuality*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth – England, 1991

⁵ Irigaray, Luce, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985

⁶ Lord, M.G., *Forever Barbie*, Avon Books, N.Y.

Nevertheless, following intense efforts to modify her hair, she just may resemble a German sex doll...

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