

**Acceleration, Disintegration, and Reconstitution:
Fidelity in the Age of Late Capitalism**

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An Excerpt from “Portrait des Künstlers als junger Grenzhund” (“Portrait of an Artist as a Young Guard-dog”) by Durs Grünbein

Der Mensch, nun ja...das alphabetisierte Tier,
Das einzige das lügt, gehorcht der Logik
Von Augenmaß und Täuschung. Was das heißt
Siehst du beim ersten Blick in eine Zeitung.
Beim Zweiten...Vorsicht...bist du schon dabei.
Was hilft der Skepsis, seit soviel geglaubt wird
Daß du wie Stickstoff Illusionen atmest
Die als Gerücht längst reiner Traumstoff sind.
(100)

The human, ah yes...the alphabetized creature,
The only one that lies, obeying the logic
From visual perception and illusion. What that means
You see with the first glance at the news.
With the second glance...caution...while you're at it.
What aids skepticism, since so much is believed,
That you breathe in, like nitrogen, illusions
That, as myths, have long been the pure substance of dreams.

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Introduction

Modernization has led society to develop at a highly-accelerated rate. With these developments come new opportunities as well as new challenges. As a consequence of these developments, the human population has grown exponentially; roughly 7 billion humans now inhabit the earth. Advancements in agriculture, medicine, and technology, as well as changes in social organization, have modified living standards and enabled the formation of highly integrated global trade and communication networks.

While many processes that have accompanied modernization and globalization have improved the living standards of millions of people, hegemonic societies have fostered these gains at the expense of millions of human beings elsewhere. In addition, these gains have also resulted from the exploitation of the earth's natural life-support systems, and resulted in global climactic change and the onset of a sixth mass extinction event (McCallum 2497). Critical theorists have demonstrated the social and natural costs incurred by these processes from a variety of perspectives and frameworks, and also invoked the term "post-modern" to describe a movement which seeks to identify and dissolve the misconceptions of the modernist experiment, namely its universal concepts of "progress."

The modern age, despite its prodigious developments, does not stand wholly distinct from the eras which preceded it. Ever evolving, we are all still homo sapiens living on the same earth where our ancestors roamed hundreds of thousands of years ago. Indeed, just as human anatomy has remained essentially the same, many of the same essential social forces which prevailed in earlier human history continue to prevail to this day. After all, one can naturally deduce *a priori* that the pre-modern age laid the necessary fundamentals of the modern age. While sociology primarily investigates modern society, an understanding of the modern age still requires some appreciation for human nature throughout history and the cultural legacies of human society which continue to pervade in the modern age. This thesis will pay special attention to the connections between social forces of language, culture, and religion as they relate to human nature and society.

The classical theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim laid the groundwork for the discipline of sociology. Their works cover a broad range of topics, but media, culture, and religion inevitably play important roles in their theories. My thesis serves as

a contribution to the sociology of religion and will cite these three classical sociologists as well as other social theories which pertain to religion. Indeed, the etymology of religion reveals that it stems from the Latin root *religio*, meaning ‘bond’. While the concept of religion has certainly changed throughout human history and especially in the modern age, I hold the Durkheimian view which proposes that the original binding function of religion remains crucial for the integrity of society.

The first argument of my thesis will assert that religion, culture, and language all share common utility in conceptualizations of human life, and that religion plays a fundamental role amongst these three phenomena. To initiate this argument, I will explore the Marxian theory of base and super-structure, as well as species-being, and explain how these concepts relate to the emergence of religion, culture, and language. After the exploration of these Marxian terms, I will discuss the common ground amongst classical sociological theories of religion, with special emphasis placed on the theory of Durkheim. This analysis will eventually lead to the conclusion that capitalism has become a religion.

In the proceeding section, I will outline sources which have offered this perspective, and explain the various religious attributes of capitalism. I will describe the manner by which “capitalistic religion” rationalizes human exploitation and the material destruction of the earth’s natural life-support systems, primarily through the frameworks of Christoph Deutschmann and David Loy. An interpretation of recent political events will also support my argument in this context.

Ultimately, I will conclude my thesis by envisioning the qualities of alternative “religions,” “superstructures,” or “belief systems” which could replace the capitalism and

facilitate, among other things, sustainable economic development, social integration, and a vision of progress which would accommodate both modern and post-modern perspectives.

Species-being, Superstructure, and the Logos: Fidelity in Artifice

Throughout human history, some questions have carried with them such an air of mystery and gravitas that, despite the collective efforts of a vast pedigree of homo sapiens to answer them as thoroughly and definitively as possible, they nevertheless elude a satisfactory delivery unto *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. These deeply philosophical questions tend to concern perplexing matters regarding life, death, and the very nature of existence itself: What is the meaning of life? Is there an afterlife? What lies beyond the perceptible world? What makes us human?

I have no intention of answering all of these questions in an ultimately satisfactory manner, nor do I consider such a task genuinely feasible, especially concerning the limitations of this academic paper. Indeed, I imagine it would prove rather difficult to articulate truly ultimate answers to such timeless questions with any real consistency, let alone arrive at the kind of obscure gnosis needed to procure them at all.

As a matter of fact, humanity has contrived hundreds, if not thousands of philosophies, cosmologies, and religions in an effort provide ultimate answers to these questions. I have no interest in concocting a new religion; I only intend to understand the storied preeminence of religion in regard to these questions. I merely invoke these timeless questions to reveal some characteristics which distinguish the unique experiences of the human species; sentience, rationality, and imagination, to name a few.

In response to the second question concerning life after death, though, I can perhaps offer an adage. Life goes on. After generations of human history, this basic fact stands the test time.

While this observation may seem vague, if not vapid, it has nevertheless served, and continues to serve, as a beacon of truth in which most human beings have likely taken solace at one time or another. Generations must eventually die and yet posterity succeeds them. As a matter of fact, generation after generation of homo sapiens have survived thousands of the earth's orbits around the sun, and have managed in that time to develop more than a few interpretations of the meaning of life, death, and existence. Countless cultural traditions serve as a testament to the quest of homo sapiens; to transcend the essential struggle of survival and find meaning within, and impose will upon, the world known through the human experience.

The persistence of these timeless questions does not stand alone in demonstrating the powerful characteristics of the human species and its ability to find meaning beyond individual, subjective experience, and transpose that meaning upon the world, what Karl Marx referred to as the human *species-being*. Indeed, what perhaps more aptly demonstrates the potency of this species-being comes not only from the vast multitude of questions which humanity has managed to both pose and answer, but also the highly efficacious strategies through which decent answers to many of life's questions, whether tacit or explicit, reliably arise.

As far as the basic questions of survival are concerned, today's humans have managed to provide several successful methods and strategies, largely due to advances in the sciences. In the past century alone, the human population has grown exponentially to nearly 7 billion, and the obstacles to survival have diminished greatly for the species, although not uniformly.

However, the ascension of homo sapiens over the rest of the natural world did not occur immediately. For thousands of years, our species struggled for survival in much the same manner that other species do; by instinct, as animals in the wild. After thousands of years, homo sapiens eventually learned to develop traits which finally allowed for the transcendence over animal

instinct and gave rise to the potent species-being. A unique and necessary fundament of the human species-being comes in the form of work upon the natural environment. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states that “it is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a species-being. This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality” (32). In the natural world, humans see both organic and inorganic materials as resources to use in accordance with their wills.

From the inorganic material of stones and the organic material of trees, for example, a group of humans may construct tools, and with that, basic shelters to protect themselves from the elements and afford themselves economic advantages. A group of humans may also fashion materials into forms which have no immediate practical advantage, but onto which they assign some abstract, perhaps even numinous value. A group of humans may thus embellish their basic structures with designs or decorations so as to convey to other groups of humans how it should be qualified as more than simply a collection of structures. Social-being proves an essential quality of human species-being.

To this end, the structures which this imagined village of humans has built work as a simplified interpretation of the Marxist concepts of base and superstructure. Species-being does not only entail manipulation of materials for the immediate purposes of survival; it also fundamentally entails the transposition of abstract meaning onto certain foci, whether natural or artificial. While the hypothetical village fashions useful tools out of raw materials, and builds structures that fulfill the basic purpose of providing shelter and economic advantage, the embellishments, perhaps flags of orange cloth, for example, may signify that they are a distinct

group of people who identify themselves through, at the very least, an affinity for the color orange.

In all likelihood, several embellishments, and not simply orange flags, would be arranged in a distinct manner, decorated with common patterns and symbols (perhaps the letter T) and associated with abstract ideas, in order to articulate a unique and complex amalgam of notions and sentiments which belong to a particular social group—not simply an affinity for the color orange would underscore these sentiments, as it were, but perhaps the spirit of volunteering. Individuals would organize themselves into a defined group, united in a practice of bound deference to these orange flags and all that these orange flags represent, relishing every opportunity to imbue their lives with the significance of the orange flags and other related embellishments, and justifying partiality to others who do the same.

Abstractions of this sort continue to find social resonance as they had at the dawn of civilization; they form the distinct hallmark of cultures, if not also religions. It is no coincidence that the term *cult* and *culture* share similar structure, deriving from the Latin term *colere*, meaning *to cultivate, till, inhabit, frequent, practice, or respect*. One might, under certain circumstances, easily regard the deference and habitation of embellishments such as the orange flags I have described as the behavior of a cult or religion, if not a culture in the broader sense. Indeed, while Marx understood base as the means and relations of production, it is the products of the superstructure which provide abstract meaning to the means and relations of production and qualify them in the consciousnesses of humans.

Symbolic interaction, and by that token, language and media, remains one of humanity's most defining inventions and belongs to the realm of the superstructure. Through language and media, humans derive and communicate abstract meaning from the world, which not only

facilitates survival, but also enables the formation of complex cultural bonds and systems of belief. Without symbolic interaction, the formation of society and its many advancements and peculiarities would have never occurred, nor would any timeless questions regarding the meaning of life ever have been formulated, let alone answered.

Language and symbolic interaction have developed into a second nature, as they are deeply embedded in the cultural legacies of society. While symbols and signs are inherent to human nature, in their prototypical stages, they were likely considered as mystical and novel as any other artifact or human creation at the time. The meaning behind each symbol, each utterance, each number or letter or arrangement thereof, had to first become culturally engrained and understood amongst different parties, who at some point collectively agreed to cultivate mutual fidelity regarding the correspondence between signs and their definite meanings. Indeed, humanity had to enshrine meaning in symbols, cultural artifacts, and utterances before abstract social arrangements could be formed and more advanced systems of communication could develop, let alone allow for riddles or lies.

It is no coincidence, for example, that members of the upper class have typically maintained greater facility with language than the lower class throughout history, just as they have maintained control over the means and relationships over production. As Marx states in *The German Ideology*, “the class which is the ruling material force over a society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (78). Ultimately, all systems of symbolic communication serve as artifice, although they are not always unnatural, deceitful, or inherently responsible for unequal hierarchies on every account. They are, nonetheless, mediated and facilitated by the basic economic factors which generally fall under the control of the ruling class; for this reason, it

would be challenging to refute the claim that symbolic interaction has, historically, lent itself to the formation of unequal hierarchies. Artifice tends to support the interests of the ruling classes.

The super-structural phenomena of symbolic interaction, which constitute key aspects of culture and religion, all share in an artificial characteristic. The origins of symbolic interaction, culture, and religion are all intrinsically linked, each giving way to the other and developing alongside each other. Over time, the versatility of signs, symbols, and artifacts would become apparent. Certain artifacts are created exclusively for their aesthetic value; they are certainly meaningful, but their meaning is not easily reducible to a simple conception. Some signs or symbols, such as the Magen David or Yin and Yang, correspond to religions replete with meaning. Other signs carry precise, scientific significance, corresponding with specific categories of time, space, quality, and cause, as noted by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (8).

Over time, alphabetical, mathematical, or other uniform systems developed from this latter genus of symbols, eventually manifesting definite logics which garnered consistent interpretations amongst culturally distinct groups. These logics enabled greater numbers of humans to communicate and coordinate, carry out previously unthinkable instrumental tasks, and make informed, highly complex determinations regarding the natural world and the differentiation of social organization. Although their origins spring from artifice, i.e. human contrivance, the validity of these logics remains self-contained, provided they are properly articulated. Nevertheless, all human artifice is predisposed to attract fidelity, and various forms of logic are no exception. To reiterate this point, one needs only to further inspect the origins of “logic” and its interpretations.

The word “logic,” although not necessarily its distinct meaning, traces back to the ancient civilizations of Greece. The word derives from the Greek term “logos,” which has been understood to mean “reason,” “word,” or “idea.” The ambiguity of this etymon sets vast parameters for the scope of application afforded to its derivatives. The term “logic” relates to the rigorous science of distinguishing true from false reasoning. The suffix -logy works as a morpheme to designate forms of writings or speech, such as a eulogy or trilogy. It also designates certain sciences or bodies of knowledge, such as sociology, cosmology, or theology. “Logos,” as a matter of fact, appears as a remarkable concept in the latter two areas of knowledge; it has not only given rise to the rigors of rationality, but also the imaginative gravitas of religion.

“Logos” would eventually be known as the word of God in the religion of Christianity. The Gospel of John inaugurated this term; the first verse of the opening chapter of John 1:1 reads as follows: “En archē ēn ho Lógos, kai ho Lógos ēn pròs tòn Theón, kai Theòs ēn ho Lógos,” or translated in English, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God.” In this passage, early Christians present Logos as the divine word of God, incarnated as Jesus Christ. The term “Logos” therefore has a remarkable affinity with different kinds of belief; it set the stage for complex logical systems which garner credence upon exhaustive determinations of truth, but also relates to faith, and the interpretations of the natural world in which humans have idealized different forms of super-nature.

The latest linguistic derivative of “Logos,” however, speaks volumes to the current state of human fidelity as it has endured throughout history. This latest derivative emerged in the 20th century as the logo, coming from the abbreviated form of the term “logogram”. A logo fulfills essentially the same role as a religious symbol or family emblem; what distinguishes it is the

context in which it applies. Logos are symbols which represent organizations of modern society. It seems a modern term for the modern age, although as we have seen, its basis stems from ancient history.

All of these iterations of “Logos” demonstrate the human tendency to create artifice and grant it fidelity, or at least intellectual appreciation (as with language), throughout history. That tendency serves as the base for society as such. It has created systems of knowledge which predate and outlive every individual who participates in them, and it constitutes humanity’s preeminent species-being.

This expression of the human species-being greatly expanded human knowledge, and after several years of continued evolution, Modern society would have it that individuals are far less restrained by religious dogma than ever before. As Durkheim remarked in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, “For a long time it has been known that the first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things. If philosophy and the sciences were born of religion, it is because religion began by taking the place of the sciences and philosophy” (8). Over the past few centuries of modernization, human knowledge has progressively been afforded a more liberal dissemination of credence.

The prowess of human knowledge varies in its scope and credentials. The evolution of the logics, whether formal, spatial, or numerical, set the stage for the now preeminent empirical sciences which focus on the natural world and its various objective machinations. These logics and sciences, such as astrophysics or computer science, have formed impressive systems of knowledge which prove their worth both in terms of efficacy and validity, and have thus derived

credence primarily from evidential understanding, and far less from mere taste, speculation, or faith.

Yet these disciplines very often seem ill-equipped to address concerns regarding subjective value, and especially when faced with the task of appreciating the more emergent phenomena of human nature and experience. The humanities and liberal arts offer a variety of creative interpretations cultural value. Through these disciplines, humans strive to create something of cultural value, not bound to the stringent methodologies of the sciences.

These descriptions serve only as ideal-types of human understanding and invention. While some humans identify themselves concretely as either artists or scientists, in reality, humans incorporate determined knowledge, through science, and creative expression, through art, into a variety of different activities. Through a combination of different activities which involve art or science, humans become the architects of human experience and understanding, as it were. Modern liberal society, unlike premodern, religious society, does not demand that these arts and sciences maintain fidelity to the dogmas of traditional religion. Individuals are afforded the right to pursue these endeavors in whatever way they would like, provided they manage to support themselves and do not break civil law. In a society in which the individual has the freedom to choose what to believe, the vast array of choices may feel overwhelming.

Common belief within modern western societies may have it that the individual is the ultimate actor, and that society is the product of various individuals. Sociology has it that this belief could not fly farther from the truth. At this juncture, a more focused account of the classical theories of sociology would prove helpful.

Classical Theories of Religion; A Focus on Durkheim

The theory of Durkheim appeals to me personally because it more or less compares society to an organic body of variable complexity—a comparison which makes sense to me as a student of environmental sociology. In his lifetime, Durkheim favored integration over conflict, weary of the political disarray and uncertainty which defined France in the industrial age. One might observe particular flaws in his theory, as competing factions within a society do not always interact in the same way that organs do, i.e. to the benefit of an integrated body, and by extension, themselves.

This observation has, for at least a few decades, served as one reason among presumably many to disregard the sociological theory of functionalism, and instead focus primarily on Marxist or critical theory. Nonetheless, in spite of ideological differences, this heuristic may still offer some degree of compatibility with the theories of symbolic interaction or conflict theory. A neo-functionalist approach to society may preserve this organic understanding of society, provided it appreciates perspectives which outline the shortcomings of society in regard to issues of inequality, oppression, and sustainability.

In any case, Durkheim clearly understood that society did not necessarily organize itself in a manner which uniformly promotes universal well-being and fairness on all accounts. Of course, Durkheim acknowledged particular malfunctions, but nevertheless focused more on how society functions for its own purposes, emphasizing the power of society over individuals. He offers a compelling theory which asserts that, concerning society and the behavior of individuals, the former extends far greater influence on the latter than the latter does on the former. It forms a being unique unto itself, in which individuals assume the double-identity both as individual agents and as interconnected subjects of the greater system. The collective consciousness, that

which binds individuals and integrates them into the greater society, ever imposes itself and shapes the order of sociality to which members either conform or from which members deviate.

His theory describes a kind of momentous force, a construction of social facts which could only conceivably change gradually if the society is to remain stable. Durkheim also describes the key process of modern society as differentiation. Without differentiation, the complexity achieved by modern society would be essentially impossible. However, therein lies a dilemma; if this complexity arises without some common cultural bond, it leads to confusion and lack of purpose, or what Durkheim describes as anomie.

This concept is similar to those defined by Marx and Weber, namely (and respectively) alienation and the Protestant Ethic inasmuch as they are the results of modern society's key processes. One could perhaps see anomie, alienation, and the Protestant Ethic less as equals, and more as different facets of the same problem. These theorists employed other comparable, although not precisely equal, concepts along the way.

For example, Marx described the concept of commodity fetishism, in which value is objectively, rather than subjectively, attributed to commodities and their function in the market. The market then arranges the relationships of individuals in terms of the products which they procure, possess and exchange. Through this understanding of capitalistic society, which Durkheim parallels through his understanding of the relationship between society and human behavior, Marx posits that in terms of the factors of production and the behavior of individuals, the former exercises far greater influence upon the latter than the latter does upon the former.

This analysis also closely resembles that of Weber, who, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, described the ethic as the religious foundation which enabled capitalism to develop, although the original religious convictions eventually subsided, rendering capitalism

somewhat baseless in relation to its assumed moral foundations. While the Protestant Ethic had originally valued work according to the virtue of “the calling” from God to live a prosperous, productive life, the asceticism of the work ethic transposed itself onto the secular world and transformed the value of production such that it no longer accorded with traditional religious principles, but rather accorded with its own material being, and its own order. “This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.” The ethic formerly contrived to justify prodigious production as an answer to “the calling” of God, a ‘light cloak’ to be ‘thrown aside at any moment’ transformed into an “iron cage” in which humanity has unknowingly trapped itself (181).

As articulated through the heuristics of Marx and Weber, humanity attributes power to a construct or artifice of its own design; humanity empowers its intellectual and material constructs collectively and imposes its constructs upon itself in the very same manner. The machinations of society follow a certain logic, at the head of which appears no distinct, recognizable figure of authority. Perhaps the head appears as capital—after all, “capital” does come from the Latin “caput,” meaning head. Nevertheless, Marx and Weber theorized about human imagination a great deal, as did Durkheim.

Durkheim also developed a similar theory which concerns the power of religion and human imagination. Indeed, Durkheim matches Marx’s employment of the term “fetishism” by employing the reference to “totems”. These theorists borrowed these terms from the ethnographers of their era, who, in creating these terms, described very similar phenomena

within religions of variable complexity. These two terms also appear largely tantamount to animism, and all three of these religious terms essentially describe the human propensity, through sheer will to power and force of imagination, to attribute symbolic or supernatural value to something external from themselves, whether natural or artificial, material or ideal, and in turn, impose that power upon itself. Durkheim discusses this topic in great detail in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

He states that religion, a defining feature of a society and its culture, usually always predates individuals in society, and subsumes them into its existing order. Indeed, humanity creates religion just as it inherits it. In the latter case, religion affords humanity avenues through which individuals may idealize a different world. Through this idealization, enabled by religion, humanity developed ideologies, aesthetics, and rituals, all of which constituted their culture. Each generation inherits and interprets religion in some form. To this extent, religion may endure as a practice, but it is also intrinsically social, and thus constantly idealized and reinterpreted through interacting consciousnesses. That being said, Durkheim acknowledged that sociality depends upon the material world which accommodates it; in principle, the ideas of religion, and its interpretations and enactments, depend on the foundation provided by the material world (423). In other words, Durkheim had at least nominal appreciation for the fact that the base supports the superstructure.

For as much as religions evolve, they may also fall into obscurity. Durkheim also notes that “in a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born”. This sentiment also reflects that of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who boldly asserted in *The Gay Science*, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (168). Such a statement may have evoked the sentiment of liberation, or just as well, loss and uncertainty. These

sentiments grew to prominence in western society in the age of industrialization. Musicians and artists of this era imbued their work with motifs which evoke a sense of the surreal. The impressionist compositions of Ravel, Debussy, and Satie, employed the use of musical scales which had been considered heretical in the age of baroque music, although their work is today often considered a part of the classical tradition. Their compositions may evoke a feeling of loss and wistfulness, or an uncertain transition from the old to the supposedly modern; this is particularly true in the case of Ravel's "Pavane pour une infante défunte," which emulates a musical style of Europe from the 15th and 16th century. For as flawed as their past may have been, these individuals still idealized it, rather nostalgically, as the stable cultural bedrock on which their uncertain era teetered.

Durkheim agreed that, throughout history, most religions strive toward an ideal world, or an ideal society. Durkheim describes the ideal society as a notion which is intrinsically linked to the real society. The real society, as it were, begets ideals to which it may or may not aspire. He notes that this ideal "hesitates over the manner in which it ought to conceive itself; it feels itself drawn in divergent directions". Durkheim goes on to assert that this dilemma does not exist in the conflict between ideal and reality, but it is rather a dilemma, namely, among "the ideas of yesterday and the ideas of to-day". The former, Durkheim says, embody the authority of tradition, while the latter embody the hope of the future (423). Inasmuch as these ideals negate each other, or fail to resonate in an agreeable enough manner across the constituents of a society, the society may experience matching degrees of anomie. It is true, then, that if a society fails to reconcile these ideals in a coordinated manner, its integrity naturally becomes compromised. Indeed, the worries of nihilism and relativism became ever more heightened during the vastly

transformative era of Durkheim and his peers, and these worries continue to breach into the present.

This worry leads us to Durkheim's observation that the gap left by a now obscured religious order has led to heightened anomie in society. Traditional religions still exist to this day, of course, but play a much less crucial role within the overall structure of most modern societies. The relegation of traditional religions to the cultural background has led to the dispersion of its functions across the other various institutions of culture. The primary function of religion was, namely, providing a collective means of idealization, especially toward an ideal world or society. Today, people still take refuge in traditional religions, as well as various ideologies, aesthetics, and rituals, many of which originated from religious life in one way or another. Insofar as these various ideologies, aesthetics, and rituals clash, anomie intensifies as a result.

What, then, has really taken the place of old religions, with all of their ideologies, aesthetics, and rituals, annihilating them or otherwise subsuming them into its order, as a major source of cohesion and collective idealization? What has, despite popular illusion, held the endeavors of the arts and sciences to its own logic? The answer to this question should now appear obvious: capitalism, or more specifically, its logos, has become the new subsuming religion.

The Logos of Capital

The notion of capitalism as a religion, despite seeming somewhat novel or contrived to modern sensibilities, has garnered some attention throughout the history of social theory. In an unfinished essay entitled *Capitalism as Religion*, which appears in Volume VI of his collected

writings, Walter Benjamin was amongst the first theorists to propose that capitalism predominates not only as an economic system, but also as a powerful system of beliefs. “One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion.” Benjamin proposes this viewpoint in opposition to the viewpoint of Weber, which holds that capitalism formed out of religious conditioning, but does not constitute a religion in and of itself. “We cannot draw close the net in which we stand. A commanding view will, however, later become possible” (259). Indeed, although Benjamin stands out as one of the first to make this claim, contemporary theorists have attempted to offer more commanding views which frame capitalism as a religion.

One commanding view comes from the perspective of Christoph Deutschmann, a German sociologist and Professor at the University of Tübingen. Deutschmann emphasizes the religiosity of capitalism through the exchange media of money, citing sociologist Georg Simmel’s theory of money to conclude that “Money is a medium that provides a combined key for (a) material and imaginary wealth, (b) ‘individual freedom’ in the social world and (c) the control of time and space” (391) To this end, Deutschmann demonstrates the artificial power which humans afford to money, and which money, in turn, affords to humans. Money takes the form of various currencies, all of which acquire legitimacy and fidelity. Even on the dollar bills of American legal tender, embellishments of national and religious symbols imbue money with a kind of supernatural character, and on each dollar bill appears the powerful declaration, “In God We Trust”. The cult of capitalism shares an affinity with other religions in that it offers its own kind of divine word, or logos.

Here the powerful myth of capitalism enters into Deutschmann’s analysis. In addition to Simmel, Deutschmann cites Marx and Weber inasmuch as he demonstrates their understanding

of capital as a means unto itself. The logos of capital demands the promulgation of itself, being both the ends and the means. “Capital can opt only for growth or decline. The message carried by the growth imperative of capital is not simply a ‘rational’ or a ‘utilitarian’ one. Rather it has the power of a religious promise” (394). Deutschmann makes a cogent point here. The ascendance of a capitalist system does not result from the simple conclusions of purely rational dialectics, but demands faith in and subordination to its promise of absolute wealth in order to exist. “As the faithful are dependent on an authentic representation of the absolute by sacred institutions, by charismatic prophets, by holy scripts with priests to interpret them, the capitalist entrepreneur has to rely on a framework of social institutions, on technical and organizational myths as well as their interpretation by scientific, technical and economic experts” (399, 400).

Economics, as a prominent example, does not qualify as a science of nature in the same way chemistry or physics do; it functions as a social science which reflects on human behavior in society. Human behavior, as I have argued, is prominently ruled by artifice as opposed to instinct. Indeed, the powerful institutions of capital, while seemingly rational in their endeavors, take on a kind of mystical character. Should we perceive the heads of The Federal Reserve or The World Bank merely as social scientists? Or are they prophets, pontiffs to the great logos of capital? Such imaginings should not necessarily lead to a full-on conflation of capitalist institutions with the Catholic Patriarchy or other orthodoxies, but the semblance of these institutions nonetheless share common features. Deutschmann makes it clear that the religion of capitalism does not belong in the same category of most traditional religions;

while religious myths usually claim timeless validity, economic myths are subject to a historical movement of growth and decline; they cannot establish themselves permanently. Thus, whereas religions are based on a fixed distinction between the

mundane world and transcendence, it seems to be just that distinction which becomes dynamic in capitalism. Transcending the mundane limits of man becomes a permanent challenge, as these limits have to be constructed, surmounted and re-constructed in a never-ending process (400).

Unlike religions who favored static economic bases, such as those achieved through feudalism, capitalism distinguishes itself in that fidelity to its logos necessarily entails a dynamo of constant self-transcendence and accelerated growth. Indeed, in acknowledging the dynamic character of capitalism, one may see how the dogmas of traditional religion would pose an obstacle to the logos of capitalism, namely the promise of growth. To overcome the obstacles found in the dogmas of old religions, capitalism has the ability to transform other religions and subsume them into its order such that they facilitate the logos of capitalism, or at least steer out of the way of this logos. To this end, David Loy elaborates in some detail.

Loy, a professor at Bunkyo University in Japan, practitioner of Zen Buddhism, authored *A Buddhist History of the West*, which characterizes the rise of modern western society through the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. In his book, Loy asserts that capitalism developed first as a European religion, and later, due to European imperialism, as a global religion. Capitalism subsumes traditional religions into its order, and has succeeded in becoming the preeminent religion of today:

The major religions are not yet moribund but, on those few occasions when they are in not in bed with the economic and political powers that be, they tend to be so preoccupied with past problems and outmoded perspectives (e.g. pronatalism) that they are irrelevant to what is really happening (e.g., fundamentalism) or trivialized (e.g., television evangelism). The results is [sic] that they have been unable to offer what is most needed,

a meaningful challenge to the aggressive proselytizing of market capitalism, which has already become the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value system in human history.

Loy further asserts that the ecological crises set forth by capitalism may serve as an essential rationale for the development of religion as an institution, not only to formulate more naturally harmonious values which capitalism fails to provide, but to recognize the failure of contemporary religious institutions in this regard as well (198). The relationship between capitalism and contemporary iterations of traditional religions becomes apparent here. Perhaps the most poignant example of the subjugation of religion into capitalism comes in the form of television evangelism, or televangelism

In televangelism, the logos of God becomes the logos of capital, and vice versa. Mega-pastors preach a gospel of wealth and faith to their adherents, promising them that if they show their faith by paying it forward monetarily, the graces of God will smile on them and deliver vast fortunes unto them. One only needs faith and a willingness to sacrifice their solvency. Mega-pastors make use of religiously-loaded rhetoric, and yet the only evidence that their services produce wealth come in the form of the wealth which they acquire from their adherents for themselves. The promise made by televangelists not only serves as an example of the preeminence of capital over traditional religions, but also mirrors the fidelity which the religion of capital demands in order to sustain itself.

What serves both as a critique of capitalism and a major indication of its religiosity is its misguided suppositions that either capitalism operates in accordance with natural law, or that capitalism's failure to operate in accordance with natural law bears no significance, as the machinations of capitalism will transform nature into something better. These suppositions fly in

the face of empirical evidence concerning global climactic change, habitat destruction, a loss of biodiversity, as well as a legacy of exploitation and the normalization of systems which treat humans as commodities, as outlined by critical theorists. Nevertheless, society continues its processes of accelerating capital accumulation, and at this point, fervent supporters of capitalism depend on faith in the viability of the promises of endless growth, rather than evidence of the contrary derived from the sciences or critical theory.

These developments have also led to several upending processes within the cultural spheres of society. Some cultural legacies are lost to the totalizing force of capitalism, while others are warped such that they become subsumed under the logos of capital. The accelerating, transformative effects of capitalism, and its promise of constant ‘progress’ and growth, have become the status quo. It is a force which found some affinity with the pseudo-religious nationalisms of the nations in which it developed, but this affinity, I argue, cannot last.

While the emergence of capitalism did not coincide with an immediate subjugation of all other social forces, it garnered a widespread acceptance in the age of industrialization, complimenting the burgeoning of liberal values exemplified through the development of the United States and Europe. Indeed, both the United Kingdom and the United States serve as examples of nations in which capitalism has found perhaps its most definite footing alongside the pseudo-religion found in nationalism. This fact became most apparent during the neoliberal age of the 1980s, in which Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan served as the paragon representatives for a new age of capital domination under the logos of capital, a capital domination which, for that moment in history, did not interfere too dramatically with their respective nationalisms. A paradox, however, eventually developed out of this age of neoliberalism; capitalism must inevitably transcend the bounds of nationalism.

For this reason, the victory of Donald Trump only further demonstrates the field of tensions which has formed between conservative nationalism and transformative capitalism. Relating to Durkheim, this tension ultimately created a palpable anomie—those who found resonance in the Trump Campaign have a longing for a condition which the United States can never again reproduce. Donald Trump has promised to return manufacturing jobs to the United States, despite the fact that capitalist processes of globalization and technological advancement have replaced American labor with either cheaper labor located in periphery countries, or automation which replaces human labor altogether. The cult of Trump wallows in the twilight zone between American nationalism and the preeminent logos of capital, whose interests are ultimately global. They believe that both capital interests and national interests overlap, and perhaps to some extent, this remains partially true, but current trends indicate that this overlap will only continue to dwindle.

Conclusion

A distinct relationship exists between superstructure and human species-being. Artifice plays an essential role in the development of the human species, and to this extent, language, culture, and religion, all share a common affinity. The concept of the *Logos* bears particular significance in the crossroads of language, culture, and religion, with its religious connotations bearing distinct significance. Religion, or at least its function, has long played an important role in the development of society. Ultimately, the function of religion to bind the constituents of a society has been dispersed and varied in the modern age. Traditional religions still exist, albeit with relegated influence, alongside more influential pseudo-religions such as nationalism. While traditional religions no longer play as essential a role in society as they once did, they have

become transformed and subsumed under the order of capitalism. Although capitalism possesses a “bonding” effect, it also leads to highly transformational processes, which often result in anomie. To this end, framing capitalism as more than just an economic system, but also a religion, may prove a meaningful heuristic in understanding human fidelity to the logos of capital, as well as different forms of fidelity, and the tensions therebetween, which exist under the predominant system of capitalism.

Having framed capitalism in such a way, it would be meaningful to consider the religious implications of other prevalent systems, such as communism or fascism. Understanding capitalism as a religion nevertheless accounts for its dogmas and inflexibilities. The logos of capital, with its promises of achieving absolution in endless growth, has proven tantamount to a Faustian bargain. While capital accumulation has merited modernization, and has this led to increased living standards and an explosive growth of the human population, the processes of capital accumulation prove highly exploitative and unsustainable, and appear to serve as an impediment to progress rather than a means to achieve it.

Sustainable developments in the economic bases of modern societies may offer intriguing case studies for these theories. The ‘Energiewende’ (Energy Transition) in Germany, for example, describes an attempt to transform the German infrastructure such that it does not depend on fossil fuels, which have proved essential in the development of capitalism. Another feature of the Energiewende comes in the form of energy independence. Certain communities have literally seized many of the means of energy production. Returning to Marxian theory, adjustments to the base infrastructure of society should inevitably lead to adjustments in the superstructure, which would enable members of society to transcend the current system of capital accumulation and create a new system. Developments of this kind may help to ensure a more

sustainable, equitable future. In doing so, members of society will grant fidelity to a logos which produces better outcomes than those produced under the logos of capital.

A proper replacement to capitalism would be both an economic system and a system of beliefs which properly appreciates both scientific knowledge and the narratives of all stakeholders who may comprise the greater society. In the realm of sociology, a combination of both critical theory and systems theory may prove helpful in offering the framework for such a system. What such a system would yield is a cosmology which corresponds directly with sciences that strive to achieve the highest degree of fidelity. It would also entail fidelity to other human beings inasmuch as human dignity, autonomy, and creative potential are preserved. Perhaps one day, a truthful and authentic religion will arise, and humanity will know itself fully as it travels through the cosmos and strives not simply to survive, but to honestly consider life's timeless questions.

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