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Capitalism as Religion:
Walter Benjamin and Max Weber

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Abstract
Benjamin's fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’, written in 1921, was only published several decades after his death. Its aim is to show that capitalism is a cultic religion, without mercy or truce, leading humanity to the ‘house of despair’. It is an astonishing document, directly based on Max Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, but – in ways akin to Ernst Bloch or Erich Fromm – transforming Weber’s ‘value-free’ analysis into a ferocious anticapitalist argument, probably inspired by Gustav Landauer's romantic and libertarian socialism. This article analyses Benjamin's fragment and explores its relationship to Weber's thesis, as well as to the tradition of romantic anticapitalism.

Keywords
Benjamin, Bloch, Calvinism, capitalism, cult, despair, Landauer, religion, socialism, Weber

Among the unpublished papers of Walter Benjamin which came out in 1985, in the sixth volume of the Gesammelte Schriften,1 the fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’ is one of the most intriguing and remarkable. Its relevance for the present state of the world is arresting. It comprises only three or four pages, including notes and bibliographical references. Dense, paradoxical, sometimes hermetic, it was not intended for publication and is not easily deciphered. The commentaries that follow are a partial attempt at interpretation, based more on hypotheses than certitudes, and leaving out some shadow areas that remain impenetrable. They may be read in the vein of Biblical or Talmudic exegeses, trying to explore each statement in some detail, and seeking to trace its connections and meanings.


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The title of the fragment is directly borrowed from Ernst Bloch’s 1921 *Thomas Münzer as Theologian of the Revolution*, which denounces Calvinism for having ‘completely destroyed Christianity’, replacing it with the elements of a new religion, ‘capitalism as religion [*Kapitalismus als religion*]’, or the Church of Mammon. We know that Benjamin read this book, because in a letter to Gershom Scholem from 27 November 1921 he told his friend: ‘Recently [Bloch] gave me, during his first visit here, the complete proofs of his “Münzer” and I’ve begun to read it’. This means that the date when the fragment was written is not exactly ‘at the latest in the middle of 1921’, as the editors indicate in a note, but rather ‘at the earliest at the end of 1921’. It should also be noted that Benjamin did not at all share the views of his friend about a Calvinist/Protestant treason of the true spirit of Christianity. Benjamin’s fragment is clearly inspired by Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber’s book is mentioned twice, once in the body of the text, and then in the bibliographical notes, which include the 1920 edition of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze sur Religionssoziologie*, as well as Ernst Troeltsch’s book, *Die Sozialehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912), which develops, concerning the origins of capitalism, similar theses as Weber’s. However, as we shall see, Benjamin’s argument goes well beyond Weber, and, above all, it replaces the latter’s ‘value-free [*Wertfrei*]’ analysis with a passionate anticapitalist attack.

‘One must see capitalism as a religion’: it is with this categorical statement that the fragment opens. This is followed by a reference to Weber’s thesis, which doubles as a critical annotation: ‘To demonstrate the religious structure of capitalism – i.e. to demonstrate that it is not only a formation conditioned by religion, as Weber thinks, but an essentially religious phenomenon – would take us today into the meanders of a boundless universal polemic’. Further on, the same idea appears again, in a somewhat attenuated form, in fact closer to the Weberian argument: ‘Christianity, at the time of the Reformation, did not favour the establishment of capitalism, it transformed itself into capitalism’. This is not so far from the conclusions of *The Protestant Ethic*. What is new is the idea of the properly religious nature of the capitalist system itself: this goes well beyond Weber, even if it relies on many aspects of his analysis.

Both dimensions of Benjamin’s response to Weber are present in his discussion of the main characteristics of the ‘religious structure of capitalism’. Benjamin does not quote Weber in this context, but his presentation is nourished by the ideas and arguments of the German sociologist, giving them, however,

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a new meaning, infinitely more critical, more radical – socially, politically and philosophically (and perhaps theologically) – and one in contradiction to the Weberian thesis of secularisation.

The first decisive trait of the capitalist religion is that it is

a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extremely cultic that ever existed. Within it, nothing has meaning that is not immediately related to the cult; it has no specific dogma or theology. Utilitarianism acquires in it, from this viewpoint, its religious coloration.

In other words, the utilitarian practices of capitalism – capital investment, speculation, financial operations, stock-exchange manipulations, the selling and buying of commodities – have the meaning of a religious cult. Capitalism does not require the acceptance of a creed, a doctrine or a theology. What counts are the actions, which take the form, in terms of their social dynamics, of cult practices. Somewhat in contradiction to his argument about Christianity and the Protestant Reformation, Benjamin compares this capitalist religion with pagan cults, which were also ‘immediately practical’ and without ‘transcendent’ aspirations.

But what is it that permits one to assimilate these economic capitalist practices to a religious ‘cult’? Benjamin does not explain it, but he uses, a few lines later, the word ‘adorer’; we may therefore suppose that, for him, the capitalist cult includes some divinities which are the object of adoration. For instance: ‘Comparison between the images of saints in different religions and the banknotes of different states’. Money, in the form of paper notes, would therefore be the object of a cult similar to the one of saints in ‘ordinary’ religions. It is interesting to note that, in a passage from One-Way Street (1928), Benjamin compares the banknotes with the ‘façade-architecture of Hell [Fassaden-architektur der Hölle]’ which manifests ‘the holy spirit of seriousness’ of capitalism.5 Let us also recall that on the gate – or the façade – of Dante’s hell stands the famous inscription: ‘Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate’. According to Marx, these were the words inscribed by the capitalist at the entrance of the factory, for the instruction of his workers. As we shall see below, despair is, for Benjamin, the religious state of the world under capitalism.

However, banknotes are only one of the manifestations of a much more essential divinity within the capitalist cultic system: money, the god Mammon, or, according to Benjamin, ‘Pluto… the god of wealth’. In the fragment’s bibliography, a violent and desperate attack on the religious power of money is mentioned: it is to be found in the book Aufruf zum Sozialismus [Call to

5. Benjamin 2001, p. 139.
Socialism], published by the German-Jewish anarchist Gustav Landauer in 1919, just before his murder by the military after the defeat of the revolution in Munich. In the page mentioned in Benjamin’s bibliographical note, Landauer wrote:

Fritz Mauthner (Wörterbuch der Philosophie) showed that the word ‘God’ [Gott] is originally identical with ‘idol’ [Götze], and both mean ‘the melted’ [or the ‘cast’, the ‘moulded’] [Gegossene].

God is an artefact made by humans, which gains a life of its own, attracting to himself the lives of humans, and finally becoming more powerful than humanity.

The only ‘cast’ [Gegossene], the only idol [Götze], the only God [Gott], to whom human beings gave life is money [Geld]. Money is artificial and it is alive, money produces money and more money, money has all the power in the world.

Who does not see, even today, that God is nothing but a spirit begot by human beings, a spirit which became a lively thing [Ding], a monster [Unding], and that it is the meaning [Sinn], which has become meaningless [Unsinn], of our life?

Money does not create wealth, it is wealth, it is wealth in itself; there is no other wealth than money.

Of course, we do not know how far Benjamin shared Landauer’s argument. But we can suppose, at least hypothetically, that this passage, mentioned in the bibliography of Benjamin’s fragment, is an example of what he understood by the ‘cult practices’ of the capitalist religion. From a Marxist viewpoint, money is only one of the manifestations – and not the most important – of capital, but Benjamin was nearer, in 1921, to the romantic and libertarian socialism of Gustav Landauer – or of Georges Sorel – than to Marx and Engels. It was only later, in The Arcades Project [Passagenwerk], that he would use Marxian concepts in order to criticise the fetish-cult of the commodity, and analyse the Parisian arcades or passages as ‘temples of merchant capital’. However, there is also a certain continuity between the 1921 fragment and the great unfinished book from the 1930s. In any case, for the young Benjamin, (gold or paper) money, wealth and commodities are some of the divinities, the idols of the capitalist religion, and their ‘practical’ manipulation in capitalist life constitutes cult phenomena, beyond which ‘nothing has any meaning’.

The second decisive trait of capitalism, which is intimately linked to its concrete cult nature, is that ‘the duration of the cult is permanent’. Capitalism is ‘the celebration of a cult sans trève et sans merci. There are no “ordinary days”, no days which are not holidays, in the terrible meaning of the deployment of sacred pomp, of the extreme tension which inhabits the adorer’. Once again, Benjamin is probably taking his cue from Weber’s Protestant Ethic, which

emphasises the methodical rules of behaviour imposed by Calvinism/capitalism, the permanent control of conduct, and the ‘religious valuation of professional work in the world – the activity which is implemented without pause, continuously and systematically’.7

Without pause, sans trêve et sans merci: Weber’s idea is absorbed by Benjamin, almost with the same words; not without irony, however, when speaking of the permanent ‘holidays’: in fact, the Puritan capitalists suppressed most of the Catholic holidays, which they considered a form of idleness. Therefore, in the capitalist religion, every day sees the deployment of the ‘sacred pomp’ – i.e. the rituals of stock-exchange or finance – while the adorers follow, with anguish and ‘extreme tension’, the rise and fall of the share values. Capitalist practices do not know any pause, they rule over the life of individuals from morning to night, from spring to winter, from the cradle to the grave. As Burkhardt Lindner notes, Benjamin’s fragment borrows from Weber the conception of capitalism as a dynamic system in global expansion, an iron destiny from which no one seems able to escape.8

Finally, the third characteristic aspect of capitalism as religion is its guilt-producing character: ‘Capitalism is probably the first example of a cult which is not expiatory [entsühnenden] but guilt-producing’. One could ask oneself what would be, in Benjamin eyes, an example of expiatory cult, that is one opposed to the spirit of capitalist religion. Since Christianity is considered by the fragment as inseparable from capitalism, it could perhaps be Judaism, whose main religious holiday is, as is well known, the Yom Kippur, usually translated as ‘the Day of Pardon’, but whose precise meaning is ‘the Day of Expiation’. But this is only a hypothesis, and nothing in the fragment points towards it.

Benjamin continues his condemnation of the capitalist religion with the following argument:

In this way, capitalism is thrown into a monstrous movement. A monstrously guilty consciousness which does not know how to expiate takes possession of the cult, not in order to atone for [i.e. expiate] this guilt, but in order to universalise it, to introduce it forcefully into consciousness, and above all, in order to involve God in this guilt, so that he himself finally has an interest in expiation.

Benjamin mentions, in this context, what he calls ‘the demonic ambiguity of the word Schuld’ – which means, at the same time, ‘debt’ and ‘guilt’.9

9. According to Burkhardt Lindner, the fragment’s historical perspective is grounded on the
One can find in Max Weber similar arguments, which also play with the connections between economic debt, moral duty and religious guilt: for the Puritan bourgeois, ‘what he spends for his personal aims is stolen from the service of God’s glory’; one therefore becomes at the same time guilty and ‘in debt’ towards God. Moreover, the idea that man has duties toward the possessions which have been entrusted to him and of whom he is only a devoted administrator... weighs over life with all its icy weight. He must... increase them by working without respite’.10 Benjamin’s expression ‘forcefully introduce guilt into consciousness’ is not so far from the Puritan/capitalist practices analysed by Weber.

However, I think that Benjamin’s argument has a broader, and more general, import. It is not only the capitalist who is guilty and ‘indebted’ towards his capital: guilt is universal. The poor are guilty because they failed to make money and became indebted: since economic success is, for Weber’s Calvinist, a sign of election and salvation, the poor are obviously damned. The Schuld is also generalised because it is transmitted, in the capitalist epoch, from generation to generation; according to a passage by Adam Müller – a German romantic-conservative, but strongly anticapitalist, social philosopher of the nineteenth century, quoted by Benjamin in the fragment’s bibliography – economic misfortune, which in the past was only borne... by the concerned generation and disappeared with its death, has become, now that all action and behaviour is expressed in gold, a heavier and heavier mass of debts [Schuldmassen] which weighs on the following generation.11

God himself is involved in this generalised guilt: if the poor are guilty and excluded from grace, and if, in capitalism, they are doomed to social exclusion, it is because ‘such is the will of God’, or, according to its equivalent in capitalist religion, the will of the Market. But is it not possible to say, from the viewpoint of the poor and indebted – which is Benjamin’s viewpoint – that it is God who is guilty, and with him, capitalism? In either case, God is intimately associated with the process of universal culpability.

So far, we can clearly make out the Weberian starting point of the fragment, in its analysis of modern capitalism as a religion born out of a transformation of Calvinism. However, there is a passage where Benjamin seems to endow

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Capitalism has developed in the West as a parasite of Christianity – one can
demonstrate this not only in relation to Calvinism, but to all the other orthodox
currents of Christianity – so that, in the last analysis, the history of Christianity
is essentially the history of its parasite, capitalism.

Benjamin does not attempt to argue for this hypothesis, but he quotes in the
bibliography a rather obscure book, Der Geist der Bürgerlich-Kapitalistischen
Gesellschaft (1914) whose author, a certain Bruno Archibald Fuchs, tries (in
vain) to prove, in a polemic against Weber, that the origins of the capitalist
world can already be found in the asceticism of the monastic orders and in the
Pope’s centralisation of power in the medieval Church.12

The result of this ‘monstrous’ process of general capitalist culpability, is the
generalisation of despair:

It belongs to the essence of this religious movement which is capitalism to persist
until the end, until God becomes completely and definitively guilty, until the world
reaches a state of such despair that one can hardly still hope. What is historically
unprecedented in capitalism is that its religion is not one of reform but of the
ruin of being. Despair spreads until it becomes the religious state of the world,
whose salvation one should hope for.

Benjamin adds, speaking of Nietzsche, that we witness the ‘transition of the
planet human being, following its absolutely solitary orbit, into the house of
despair [Haus der Verzweiflung].’

Why is Nietzsche mentioned in this astonishing diagnosis, with its poetical
and astrological overtones? If despair is the radical absence of any hope, it
is perfectly represented by the amor fati, ‘the love of fate’ preached by the
philosopher with a hammer in Ecce Homo: ‘My formula for human greatness
is amor fati, not wanting anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards,
not for all eternity. Not just enduring what is necessary… but loving it…’.13

Of course, Nietzsche does not speak of capitalism. It is the Nietzschean
Max Weber who will acknowledge with resignation – but not necessarily with
love – the ineluctable character of capitalism, as the fate of modern times. It is
in the last pages of the Protestant Ethic that Weber notes, with pessimistic
fatalism, that modern capitalism ‘determines, with overwhelming force, the
lifestyle of all individuals born into it – not only those directly concerned with

economic acquisition’. This constraint is compared to a sort of prison, into which individuals are trapped by the rational system of commodity production:

‘According to Baxter, the concern for material goods should lie upon the shoulders of his saints like “a lightweight mantle that could be thrown off at any time”. But fate transformed this mantle into a iron cage [stahlharten Gehäuse].’

There are several translations or interpretations for the expression stahlharten Gehäuse: for some scholars, it is a ‘cell’ (as in a monastery), for others a ‘shell’, like the one carried by the snail on its back. The most plausible hypothesis is, however, that Weber borrowed the image from the ‘iron cage of despair’ invented by the English Puritan poet Bunyan.

Haus der Verzweiflung, Stahlharten Gehäuse, iron cage of despair: from Weber to Benjamin, we find ourselves in the same semantic field, which tries to describe the merciless logic of the capitalist system. But why does it produce despair? There are several possible answers to this question:

a) First of all because, as we have seen, capitalism, by defining itself as the natural and necessary form of the modern economy, does not admit any different future, any way out, any alternative. Its force is, writes Weber, ‘irresistible’, and it presents itself as an inevitable fate [fatum].

b) The system reduces the vast majority of humanity to ‘damned of the earth’ who cannot hope for divine salvation, since their economic failure is the sign that they are excluded from God’s grace. Guilty for their own fate, they have no hope of redemption. The God of the capitalist religion, money, has no pity for those who have no money . . .

c) Capitalism is ‘the ruin of being’, it replaces being with having, human qualities with commodified quantities, human relations with monetary ones, moral or cultural values with the only value that counts, money. This argument does not appear in the fragment, but it is extensively developed by the anticapitalist, romantic-socialist authors mentioned in Benjamin’s bibliography: Gustav Landauer and Georges Sorel – as well as, in a conservative variant, Adam Müller. It is interesting that the word used by Benjamin, Zertrümmerung, is similar to the one used in Thesis IX of ‘On the Concept of History’, to describe the ruins produced by Progress: Trümmern.

d) Since humanity’s ‘guilt’ – its indebtedness towards Capital – is permanent and growing, no hope of expiation is permitted. The capitalist constantly needs to grow and expand his capital if he does not wish to be crushed by his

14. Weber 1984, p. 188.
competitors, and the poor must borrow more and more money to pay their debts.

e) According to the religion of Capital, the only salvation consists in the intensification of the system, in capitalist expansion, in the accumulation of more and more commodities; but this ‘remedy’ results only in the aggravation of despair.

These hypotheses are not contradictory or mutually exclusive, but there are no elements in the fragment that would allow one to draw conclusions and settle for one or the other. Benjamin seems, however, to associate despair with the absence of a way out:

Poverty, such as that of vagabond monks, does not offer a spiritual – non-material – way out. A state of affairs that offers such few ways out generates guilt. The ‘worries’ are the index of this guilty consciousness of the lack of a way out. The ‘worries’ originate in the fear that there is no way out, neither a material and individual nor a communitarian one.

The ascetic practices of the monks are not a way out, because they do not question the domination of the capitalist religion. The purely individual escapes are an illusion, and a communitarian, collective or social way out is denied by the system.

However, for Benjamin, a sworn enemy of the capitalist religion, a way out must be found. He briefly examines, or at least mentions, some of the suggestions for ‘exiting capitalism’:

i) A reform of the capitalist religion. This is impossible, because of its complete perversity: ‘One cannot expect expiation, neither from the cult itself, nor from a reform of this religion – since it would be necessary for this reform to ground itself in some definite aspect of this religion – nor in its abjuration’. Abjuration is not a way out, because it is purely individual: it does not prevent the gods of Capital from continuing to impose their domination on society. As far as reform is concerned, here is what Gustav Landauer has to say, in the page next to the one mentioned by Benjamin in the bibliography: ‘The God [Money] has become so powerful and omnipotent, that it cannot be abolished by a simple restructuring, a reform of the mercantile economy [Täuschwirtschaft]’.\(^\text{16}\)

ii) Nietzsche and his overman. For Benjamin, far from being an opponent, Nietzsche was

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the first to knowingly take the initiative to accomplish the capitalist religion. . . .
The thought of the superman displaces the apocalyptic ‘leap’ not in conversion, expiation, purification and contrition, but in an intensification. . . . The superman is the historical man who has arrived without converting himself, who grew by trespassing heavens. Nietzsche inflicted damage to this explosion of heaven provoked by the intensification of the human, who is and remains, from the religious viewpoint (even for Nietzsche), guilty.¹⁷

How are we to interpret this rather obscure passage? One possible reading could be the following: the superman only intensifies the *hybris*, the will to power and infinite expansion of the capitalist religion; he does not challenge the guilt and despair of human beings, leaving them to their fate. This is just another attempt by individuals who consider themselves to be exceptional, or by an aristocratic élite, to escape the iron circle of the capitalist religion, but, in fact, it ends up reproducing capitalism’s logic. This is only a hypothesis, and I must confess that this part of Benjamin’s critique of Nietzsche remains quite mysterious to me.

iii) Marx’s socialism: ‘In Marx, capitalism which has not converted itself becomes socialism by interest and compound interest, which are a product of the *Schuld* (see the demonic ambiguity of this word)’. In effect, at this time, Benjamin did not know much about Marx’s work. He is probably taking over Gustav Landauer’s critique of Marxism: according to the anarchist thinker, Marx aims at a sort of Kapitalsozialismus, where ‘capitalism brings forward entirely [ganz und gar] socialism out of itself; the socialist mode of production “blooms” [entblüht] out of capitalism’, above all by the centralisation of production and credit.¹⁸ But it is not clear why Benjamin refers, in this context, to the concept of Schuld, i.e. at the same time ‘debt’ and ‘guilt’. In any case, for him, Marxian socialism remains imprisoned in the categories of capitalist religion, and therefore does not represent a real way out. As we know, Benjamin will radically change his mind in this respect, after reading, in 1924, Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (and, of course, meeting the Soviet theatre director/activist Asja Lacis).

iv) Erich Unger and the exit out of capitalism: ‘Overcoming capitalism by Wanderung. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, p. 44’.¹⁹ By Wanderung, Benjamin does not mean excursions in the woods – one of the ordinary meanings of the word – but rather migration. The expression used by Erich Unger is Wanderung der Völker, the migration of peoples. Here is what he writes on page 44 of the book mentioned by Benjamin:

¹⁸. Landauer 1919, p. 42.
There is only one logical choice: either traffic without friction, or the migration of peoples. The attack against the ‘capitalist system’ is eternally doomed to failure in the site of its validity. In order to accomplish something against capitalism, it is necessary, before everything else, to leave \( \text{heraustreten} \) its sphere of efficacy \( \text{Wirkungsbereich} \), because within itself, the system is able to absorb any contrary action.\(^{20}\)

The aim is, in the final analysis, to replace civil war by the \( \text{Völkerwanderung} \).

Benjamin had much interest and sympathy for Erich Unger’s ‘metaphysical anarchist’ ideas, favourably mentioning him in his correspondence with Scholem. However, we do not know if he considered this ‘exit out of the capitalist sphere’ as a valid way out. The fragment does not give us any clue.\(^{21}\)

v) Gustav Landauer’s libertarian socialism, as presented in \( \text{Aufruf zum Sozialismus} \). In the page next to the one quoted by Benjamin in the fragment, we find the following argument:

Socialism is the return [or conversion] \( \text{Umkehr} \); socialism is a new beginning; socialism is the restoration of the link \( \text{Wiederanschluss} \) with nature, a re-infusion of the spirit, a re-conquest of the [human] relationship. . . . Socialists want once more to assemble in communes \( \text{Gemeinden} \).\(^{22}\)

The strange word used by Landauer, \( \text{Umkehr} \), is exactly the one Benjamin employs to criticise Nietzsche – whose superman refuses ‘conversion, expiation \( \text{Umkehr, Sühne} \)’ and reaches the heavens without conversion \( \text{Umkehr} \); as well as Marx, whose socialism is nothing but ‘a capitalism that does not convert itself \( \text{nicht umkehrende} \)’. What can be the precise meaning of this curious theological-political terminology? One may suppose that Landauer’s socialism – which requires a sort of ‘conversion’ or ‘return’ to nature, to human relations, to communitarian life – is the escape hatch out of the ‘house of despair’ built by the capitalist religion. Landauer is not far from believing, like Erich Unger, that one has to leave the sphere of capitalist domination in order to create, in the rural areas, socialist communes. But, in his eyes, this programme did not contradict the perspective of a social revolution: soon after the publication of his book, he participated, as People’s Commissar for Education, in the short-lived Munich Conciliar Republic of 1919 – a courageous commitment that would cost him his life.

\(^{20}\) Unger 1989, p. 44.
\(^{21}\) According to Joachim von Soosten, while Unger looks for an exit out of capitalism in \textit{space}, Benjamin thinks in eschatological \textit{temporal} terms. See von Soosten 2003, p. 297.
\(^{22}\) Landauer 1919, p. 145.
In an interesting commentary on the concept of *Umkehr* in Benjamin’s fragment, Norbert Bolz has interpreted it as an answer to Weber’s argument concerning capitalism as an inescapable destiny. For Benjamin, *Umkehr* means at the same time interruption of history, *metanoia*, expiation, purification and... revolution.23 Of course, these are all suppositions, since the fragment itself does not indicate any way out; it only analyses, with horror and obvious hostility, the merciless and ‘monstrous’ logic of capitalist religion.

In Benjamin’s writings from the 1930s, foremost in the *Passagenwerk*, this topic of capitalism as religion will be replaced by the critique of commodity fetishism, and of capital as a mythical structure. One can certainly point to the affinities between both arguments – for instance, the reference to the religious aspects of the capitalist system – but the differences are also evident: the theoretical framework is now clearly a Marxist one.

Weber’s problematic seems also to disappear from the theoretical field developed by the later Benjamin. However, in the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940), we can find a last reference – implicit but easily identifiable – to the Weberian argument. Criticising, in Thesis XI, the cult of industrial labour in German Social Democracy, Benjamin writes: ‘With the German workers, the old protestant work ethic [*protestantische Werkmoral*] celebrated, under a secularised form, its resurrection’.24

Inspired by Weber, but going well beyond his sober sociological analysis, Benjamin’s 1921 fragment belongs to an intellectual constellation that could be designated as the anticapitalist readings of Max Weber. This sort of interpretation must be considered, to a large extent, as a creative ‘misappropriation’: Weber’s attitude towards capitalism did not go beyond a certain ambivalence, a mixture of ‘value-free’ science, pessimism and resignation. Instead, some of his dissident ‘disciples’ will use the arguments of the *Protestant Ethic* in order to develop a virulent anticapitalism, of socialist-romantic inspiration.

The first star in this constellation is Ernst Bloch, who had taken part, in the years 1912–14, in Max Weber’s circle of friends which met every Sunday at the latter’s home in Heidelberg. As we have seen, it was Bloch who ‘invented’, in his 1921 *Thomas Münzer*, the expression ‘capitalism as religion [*Kapitalismus als religion*]’ – a theological disaster whose responsibility he assigns to Calvinism.25 The witness called on to shore up this accusation is none other than... Max Weber. Among Calvin’s followers, says Bloch,

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thanks to the abstract duty to work, production unfolds in a harsh and systematic way, since the ideal of poverty, applied by Calvin only to consumption, contributes to the formation of capital. The obligation of saving is imposed on wealth, conceived as an abstract quantity which is an aim in itself, requiring growth.... As Max Weber has brilliantly shown, the capitalist economy in development is totally emancipated, detached, liberated from all the qualms of primitive Christianity, as well as all the relatively Christian aspects of the economic ideology of the Middle Ages.26

Weber’s ‘axiologically neutral’ analysis of the role of Calvinism in the rise of the capitalist spirit becomes, in the eyes of Ernst Bloch – a sui generis Marxist fascinated by Catholicism – a ferocious attack on capitalism and its Protestant origins.

As we saw, Benjamin certainly took inspiration from his friend’s book, without, however, sharing Bloch’s sympathy for the ‘qualms of primitive Christianity’ or the ‘relatively Christian’ moments of medieval Catholicism’s economic ideology. One can also find, in certain passages of Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, quotations from Weber used as arguments in support of his Marxist critique of capitalist reification. A few years later, the Freud-Marxist Erich Fromm refers, in an essay from 1932, to Weber and Sombart in order to denounce the responsibility of Calvinism in the destruction of the idea of a right to happiness, typical of precapitalist societies – such as the medieval Catholic one – and its replacement by bourgeois ethical norms: the duty to work, acquire and save.27

Benjamin’s 1921 fragment is one of the striking examples of this strain of ‘inventive’ readings – all by romantic-socialist Jewish-German thinkers – which use Weber’s sociological research, and, in particular, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, as ammunition in order to mount a thorough attack on the capitalist system, its values, its practices and its ‘religion’.28

28. It would be interesting to compare Benjamin’s ‘Capitalism as Religion’ with the writings of some Latin-American liberation theologians, who – without having the slightest knowledge of the fragment from 1921 – developed, from the 1980s, a radical criticism of capitalism as an idolatrous religion. For instance, according to Hugo Assmann, it is in the explicit theology of the economic paradigm itself, and in daily fetishistic devotional practice, that the capitalist religion reveals itself. The explicitly religious concepts that can be found in the literature of ‘market Christianity’ – for instance, those produced by neoconservative theologians – only have a complementary function. Market theology, from Malthus to the latest World-Bank document, is a ferociously sacrificial theology: it requires from the poor that they offer their lives at the altar of economic idols. See Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989. The analogies (as well as the differences) with Benjamin’s ideas are manifest.
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