9. The bourgeois sacred: Unveiling the 'secular society'

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Debates over Globalisation and The War on Terror often accept that shifting agglomeration called The West as the bastion of secularism. Whether this is a progressive force of freedom and enlightenment or a profane, cold sweatshop machine, this secularism is established against an exotic Other of primal passionate faith or feudal, superstitious zealotry, depending on your position. My talk aims to examine this image of the West and to propose that the irrationality associated with the sacred is not a feudal left-over, or even just a tolerated 'personal choice'. In fact I hope to show that the sacred is an integral component of the institutions of modern power and especially that core of capitalist secularism: the commodity relationship.

To begin, it is worth looking critically at one of the key moments regaled by boosters of the Western Tradition. The supposed birth of science and philosophy in sixth century BCE Greek Asia Minor, shedding the chrysalis of mythos like some enlightenment butterfly, is itself somewhat of a myth. Though this period did indeed see the introduction of a sceptical materialism, identifiable to the modern scientific method,¹ it was 'contaminated' by the Homeric mythopoeic life-world that still predominated, 'Thales, the father of materialism, still conceived of the principle of life, movement and dynamism in terms of the gods'.² Nor was such a mix simply early teething problems. The seventeenth century, designated in Europe as the 'scientific revolution', saw foundational figures like Kepler, Descartes and Newton as interested in astrology, the Bible and the occult as they were in astronomy, mathematics and physics; indeed often combining these interests.³ If contemporary scientists rarely combine *séance* with their science, Erik Davis, in his book *Techgnosis* shows that this syncretism continues to exist in a manner no less forceful for its sublimation.⁴ Noting that the term 'electricity' was coined by a seventeenth century magus and chemist, Davis sees an 'electromagnetic imaginary' that renders this 'invisible force' in our information technology world. The mythos of cyberculture entreats a gnostic transcendence of ethereal data over 'old economy' matter. Though sublimated, this mix of mysticism and materialism is generally acknowledged by the coexistence of religion and the modern state.

Whether or not Weber's thesis of a foundational Protestant Ethic to the 'Spirit of Capitalism' is valid⁵ the entwinement of religion and bourgeois governance continues to remain, such as to make any notion of archaic detritus problematic

to say the least. This is, after all, the age of *Pax Americanus* where the seat of imperial power cannot, by unwritten law, be held by a professed atheist and the tenets of Christian Puritanism impact on imperial policy (such as the withdrawal of family-planning aid). Even within the laid-back secularism of Australia, the elements of shadow theocracy lurk, as adduced in David Marr's *The High Price of Heaven* by the influential role of conservative church leaders in social policy issues like censorship, drugs and education.⁶ Given the aridity of secular parliamentary politics, where cynicism is a basically accepted, if not necessarily celebrated, fact, it is hardly surprising that religion should remain so predominant. In fact one could rightly ask, given the alacrity with which religion is accepted, to what degree the bourgeois political-economic apparatus is distinctly 'rational' at all.

Of course, if the history of science is entangled in the mystical, it should not surprise us that any definitive description of rationality is vexed to say the least. If deconstructionist critiques have problematised the foundations of mind/body duality, and even the objectivity of scientific methodology, I will at least claim that such understandings of objective reason represent an unprecedented *effort* at closure of signification. It is this effort to achieve closure that marks modern rationality. The construction of bourgeois society has seen the systematisation of almost every aspect of social life to an analogue of scientific closure such that that which fails the test, signification that is incomplete, can be policed more effectively as 'irrational'. However, such rigour cannot expunge signification in excess, that which overflows closure: the extra-ordinary, the arational (in case it needs to be reiterated, the same behaviour can be classified as either irrational, like madness, or arational, like eccentricity, depending on the overall system of rationality). Modern administration has thus been forced to call upon the traditional gatekeeper of the mystical: the sacred; that which allows the inevitable heterogenous surplus of hope, passion and faith to flow, though within defined channels. It is the guarantor but also the guard of the amorphous border zone between the rational and arational. How is the sacred able to fulfil both of these potentially contradictory roles?

To understand the 'dynamic boundedness' of the sacred we need to move beyond the oscillation between the non-rational as merely illusional and the non-rational as transcendently real. It is here Wolfgang Fritz Haug's notion of the 'technocracy of sensuousness' is extremely useful, as much for its flaws as its conceptual attributes. For Haug, the social harnessing of the arational is the control of appearance.⁷ The embodied grounding of structures of domination becomes an elaborate conjuring trick where reality is disguised by a mystical aura that justifies hierarchical accumulation. This surface abstraction is totally malleable, being detached from logico-empirical constraints and can thus similarly detach, 'sensuousness and sense from an object and...[make] them available

separately'.⁸ The semblance is a shadow of 'real' sensuality that displaces and channels desires and emotions to form a technocracy of sensuousness.

Yet, though Haug is right to show the way rational systematisation mediates sensuality, he pushes this mediation until it becomes almost determination. On what basis is a desire declared real or false without collapsing arationality into rationality? Yet by retaining the sense of mediation, we can avoid such a subsumption without weakening the notion of a technocracy of sensuousness. There are no administrative protocols for ecstatic joy or hope; but does that mean such effects exist beyond social relations? To the extent our feelings are social, they are mediated by power, as theorists like Foucault have shown in the intimate nature of discipline within institutions like schools, prisons and hospitals. But to maintain a lasting mediation—a technocracy of sensuousness—this discipline needs to be balanced with a genuine concession to the arational.

Nietzsche, in noting the constructed nature of 'reality', also implied that we habitually 'forget' this artifice to get through our lives (we can stop in the middle of traffic and deconstruct the concept of 'on-coming truck' or immediately respond to it as a given and live).⁹ To feel as real as this truck, any technocracy of sensuousness must certainly impose a ubiquitous form and a taken-for-granted status. But to ensure this form is 'forgotten' as a manipulated artifice, it is imperative that it develop through a degree of contested openness and discontinuity. Combined, this provides a sense of authentic belonging, reassuring 'common sense' and a touch of the ecstatic unfathomable to feed our desire for transcendence. Contrary to the Poststructuralist consensus that such discontinuity is inherently subversive, the fact that the mystical continues to exist within reproducing systems of power raises the possibility that the arational may have an important role in these systems. Certainly, this can never be a direct correlation, as the arational remains dangerous and unstable (as any morality tale about dabbling in the occult will tell you). Technocracies of sensuousness thus function like casinos, which must provide a real chance of transcending the rational norms of earning money to stay in business, with the consequent threat of the casino going broke. The calculated risk embodied in sacred mysticism, that transcendent ecstatic visions will be so demanded as to transcend the political *status quo*, is also what reinforces legitimated power. The sacred as a technocracy of sensuousness aims to bring a sense of closure to the affective world of the mystical, not by denying its arationality but by mediating it with laws open to the *possibility* of transcendence.

Thus, religions like Christianity have never closed the loop with the dictates of earthly power. I must make a brief digression here to say that I find the distinction between 'religion-as-institution' and 'religiosity'/'spirituality' to be very problematic. Such a dichotomy implies a clear separation between a

politically compromised sense of religion, which can be conceded in the face of overwhelming evidence of such a 'compromise', and a transcendent, individual spirituality beyond such tarnished 'organisation', thus salvaging some pure sense of religion (which is then used by the powerful, such as the current American government, when they refer to 'faith-based initiatives' rather than 'religion'). Not only does such a conceptualisation play fast and loose with the social mediation of *all* spiritual beliefs (such as the New Age, which, dressed in the mysterious rags of plundered exotic beliefs and without credibility-draining institutions, also contains a self-help philosophy of American capitalist 'can-do')¹⁰ but it even overstates the complicity of religion-as-institution with systems of mortal power and rigid orthodoxy. For these religions, like Christianity, multiple interpretations continue to slew off from the core, despite the reactionary efforts of fundamentalists. Yet, rather than imploding the core, this heterogenous *différance* has maintained the passionate commitment, the trans-historical 'reality', of Christianity, even as it has been superseded as the locus of the Western technocracy of sensuousness.

The emergent European bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century were keen to establish their hegemony on soil as distinct from feudal absolutism as possible, which meant trying to foster a distinctly modern sacred. Such a concept was found in the resuscitation of an ancient Greek term, '*aisthesis*'. Though used by Platonists to describe shallow sense-perception, *aisthesis* had an alternative usage amongst ancient materialist philosophers that equated it to the breadth of 'consciousness', both sensual and cerebral.¹¹ After nearly two millennia of semantic ostracism under Christian idealism, the term was reintroduced into the modern lexicon as 'aesthetics' (initially '*aestheticus*') by the eighteenth-century German rationalist Baumgarten to describe the enigmatic human senses. However modern rationality based its identity against the whimsical, subjective world of the sensory, how could the latter be corralled by rational methods? Baumgarten acknowledged the difficulty of this enterprise, eventually succumbing to the ambiguity created between 'reason' and 'sense-perception' in his promotion of an 'aesthetic knowledge', which he saw as more effective than abstract reason in many ways.¹² Kant, a few decades later, tried valiantly to protect Enlightenment rationality from such aesthetic erosion by mapping epistemological boundaries rather than content, thus ostensibly keeping the tools of rational conceptualism clean from perceptual affective flux. But without a proper interstitial agent between reason and aesthetics, Kant's boundaries proved porous, as he himself implicitly admitted in the *Critique of Judgement*.¹³ It was after Kant that such an agent was found to preserve the sacred mysteries of imaginative, sensual, free-willing aesthetic subjectivity within the scientific-industrial complex. Thus was Art born amidst the Industrial Revolution.

New bourgeois movements like Romanticism had no time for the theoretical niceties of Kant and took the formal similarities between Artistic and aesthetic beauty as reason to bind the two and thus to ensure 'an excess of individual, subjective autonomy in which to locate bourgeois identity'.¹⁴ Here then was a sanctioned form of 'arationality', the inevitable and celebrated residue of rationalism. Just as divinity embodied absolutism, and all its contradictions, in a sacred, 'arational' form in Western Christianity, so Art was embodied as the sacred, arational form of bourgeois values and subjectivity. The arational energy of the aesthetic was bound to Art the way the amorphous energy of Christian mysticism was bound to institutional icons and rituals.

Yet the exclusivity of Art, replicating the exclusivity of Christian learning amongst the educated medieval clergy,¹⁵ has increased the impetus for a broader bourgeois technocracy of sensuousness. To this end the locus of the modern sacred is being gradually moved from Art to the very germ of capitalist rationality: the commodity. 'A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.¹⁶ If Christianity's sacred excess is felt in the hope of salvation and Art's in the irreducibility of subjective expression, then the commodity's is the liberation of desire. This capitalist excess is the Romanticist dream of liberated subjectivity free from stuffy social convention, eternal horizons to adventure towards and whatever we want when we want it. The sacred catch, to make sure this fantasy does not fly free of rational closure, is that this liberated desire is only meant to be enacted within the commodity relationship. If we all decided to enact our desires beyond commodities, capitalism would crumble. The sacred thus balances the arational dreams of the liberated subject with the very rational demands of profit valorisation.

To this end, the aesthetic, initially quarantined within the Art work, has been paroled as the design of commodities and advertising style have taken precedence over more logocentric marketing (framed as appeals to reason). Corporations spend inordinate sums of money on advertisements high in style and low on product information (unless you consider 'Coke adds life' or 'Just Do It' product information). They also fight tooth and nail to protect their ephemeral brand icons, which, as Naomi Klein has documented in *No Logo*, have become powerful markers of status and self.¹⁷ If that sounds conspiratorial you should note that the CEO of advertising company Saatchi & Saatchi has just written a widely marketed book called *Lovemarks*, which demands that businesses create long-term emotional relationships with consumers by infusing their brands with mystery, sensuality, and intimacy.¹⁸ But it is in the very design of everyday lifestyle products that the inscrutable aesthetic is most effective, becoming more and more like Art where form does not follow function. Or, are we to believe that

the animistically organic smooth curves of iMacs and mobile phones make them faster and more efficient?

However, before we glibly declare consumerism the 'new religion', we need to remember that religion derives from '*religio*' referring to social bonds,¹⁹ something the alienating individualism of consumer culture retards. As well, the push to 'spiritualise' commodities is rather young (thus lacking the authenticity of duration), not to mention the overt association commodity exchange must hold with rationalism; the opposite problem of religion, which must maintain its association with the spiritual and remain furtive about relations with earthly power. Yet, any cynicism this generates is also evidence of the open discontinuity of commodity aesthetics that many have taken as evidence of genuine egalitarian authenticity. All these ironic digs at advertising (which advertisers engage in as well), if framed without substantial alternative visions, simply promote more interest in the commodity and diminish its manipulative aura. It thus seems dynamically negotiated even as it reaches omnipresence, dictated by an oligarchy of near-unaccountable marketing and sales executives.

Even if the gamble of playing to ironic engagement fails, there remain older technocracies of sensuousness like religion, Art and patriotism, whose survival as 'tradition' implies legitimacy, regardless of how much this relates to top-down manipulation. These 'traditional' forms function to soak up ecstatic, transcendent yearning and keep disillusionment in check. The much applauded 'tolerance' of the West is less a function of bourgeois generosity than a necessary aid to the sacralisation of capitalism. The aforementioned coexistence between religion and capitalism is as much to do with how much this religion makes itself 'tolerable' as anything else. This is either through directly augmenting overt commodity values like individualism (*à la* Protestantism) and property rights, or upholding latent values like respect for authority (this does not have to be explicit doctrine, even the implicitly hierarchical nature of monotheistic worship is enough, not to mention the gender politics of God as a He), which are vital for the commodity relationship but which must be formally disavowed. The bare minimum for tolerance is to not directly contradict the commodity with 'extremist' morality against greed, usury and free markets. Such is the tacit understanding of 'moderate Islam', loudly preached by the Coalition of the Willing lest anyone mistake their War on Terror as a War on the Sacred.

Indeed far from signalling absolute profanity, consumer societies are in fact overwhelming us with the sacred. That this regulation of the mystical cannot be reduced to mere political interest is hardly grounds for apolitical acquittal, especially as it is the irreducible arational element of the sacred that entices passionate identity with abstractions that maintain priestly or profiteering elites. The underlying premise of negotiating the sacred is that its arational form, the passionate faith it evokes, problematises the critical scrutiny that we accept for

political rationalism. But if the presence of arationality was to foreclose critique then there would be none, for the arational is as much a part of our social mediation as the rational. Rather than merely accepting the sacred as, for better or for worse, the only way to access the mystical and passionate, perhaps we can begin pondering the removal of the sacred gatekeeper to be replaced by arational agents that open the social resources of imaginative ecstasy and transcendent yearning to more immanent, democratic forms.

ENDNOTES

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