

THE COMMODIFICATION OF RELIGION  
OR THE CONSUMMATION OF CAPITALISM

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IN *THE IMAGINARY INSTITUTION OF SOCIETY*, CORNELIUS Castoriadis, commenting critically on the Marxist understanding of economic development, writes:

Reification, the essential tendency of capitalism, can never be wholly realized. If it were, if the system were actually able to change individuals into things moved only by economic “forces,” it would collapse not in the long run, but immediately. The struggle of people against reification is, just as much as the tendency towards reification, the condition for the functioning of capitalism.... Capitalism can function only by continually drawing upon the genuinely human activity of those subject to it, while at the same time trying to level and dehumanize them as much as possible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity, 1987) 16.

This is a curious statement for Castoriadis to make, but before I develop just why, allow me to clarify four points of his argument.

First, for Marx reification and commodification are the two fundamental processes of capitalism. Reification [*Verdinglichung*] is not a synonym for the production of commodities [*Produktionprozess der Waren*]. Rather, reification is associated in Marx with what happens to human beings—the transformation of persons into things.<sup>2</sup> Commodification is what happens to the products of human labor when they are placed in systems of exchange.<sup>3</sup> While different, these two processes are intimately related. If reification can never be completed, as Castoriadis argues, then neither can commodification. Second, reification, according to Castoriadis, cannot be completed because of the residual and resistant humanity that prevents that completion. Ironically, that prevention opens up space for the continuing process of producing commodities. That is, human beings remain free and independent from the processes of capitalism—and this freedom ensures a future for the capitalist system. Third, this freedom and independence is rooted in the fact that individuals are a) not turned into things and b) not turned into things “moved only by economic ‘forces.’” Finally, capitalism requires the freedom and independence of human agents in order to continue as a process and not collapse immediately.

What is so surprising about Castoriadis’ statement is that he also argues that “the individual is a social institution.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, what is human is a social fabrication; it is not some essential thing existing in a pre-social condition, in the way that the subject is conceived in liberal humanism. Certainly, he is critical of attempts to erase the subject—as in the poststructural “death of the author”—for he wishes to emphasize that all hope of social transformation lies in the ability to act both

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) 1054. All subsequent references to this work are made parenthetically in the text of the essay. For the German text see Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, vol. I (Leipzig: Knoener, 1929).

<sup>3</sup> Marx himself never used the word “commodification”; there is no German equivalent.

<sup>4</sup> Castoriadis 247.

individually and socially. Nevertheless, what is “genuinely human” is never established by Castoriadis. Subjects are in possession of what he terms a “radical imagination.” They construct notions of their own identity and make sense of the world on the basis of a magma or “incessant flux in and through which anything can be given...this thick and continuous flow [of representations] which we ourselves are.”<sup>5</sup> Humanisms are institutions of this order; they are continually undergoing a process of modification. Even capitalists are of this order; they are made:

For someone who lives in a capitalist society reality is what is posited by the institution of capitalism as constituting reality.... This reality is, in any case, that of a host of second-level institutions, of socially categorized individuals (capitalists and proletarians), of machines and so forth—social-historical creations held together by the common reference to a magma of imaginary social significations which are those of capitalism, and by means of this common reference these significations actually *do exist* and exist as *what* they are both in general and for each individual. This reality as a social-historical creation, includes within it, and would be impossible without, the social fabrication of individuals who *are* capitalists.<sup>6</sup>

Whence then is this “genuine humanity” that struggles heroically against the humiliations and atomizations of capitalist hegemony?

While this is not an essay on Castoriadis, his work reveals a tension inherent in critiques of reification. This tension focuses around an understanding of what it is to be human. On the one hand, there is no place outside the immanent cultural logic of production. On the other, in order for there to be real transformation of and critical engagement with this production, a point has to be insisted upon that *does* lie

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<sup>5</sup> Castoriadis 331.

<sup>6</sup> Castoriadis 319.

outside this immanence—namely (here) “genuine humanity.” *The question of what is genuinely human is, in fact, the crux of the matter.*

In order to vouchsafe the possibility of resistance, the logic of capitalist production cannot be allowed to be a logic that subsumes all things. But the very inability to give an account of what is genuinely human raises the question of whether this logic does subsume all things, of whether the consummation of that logic is, in fact, the subsumption of all possibility of there being an externality, a transcending means of resistance, a dialectical other. Marx himself writes: “The *inherent* tendency of capitalist production does not become *adequately realised*...until the specific mode of *capitalist production and hence the real subsumption of labour* has become a reality” (1037). Antonio Negri argues convincingly that this “real subsumption” that “reduces dialectical possibilities to zero”<sup>7</sup> now has occurred.

What I am wondering, in effect, is what Castoriadis would have made of a film like *The Matrix*. For capitalism to be possible, human beings must be impossible to reduce to productive-economic abstractions. In Marx’s terms, neither they nor the products of their labor can simply become bearers of exchange-value. This is, of course, precisely what Morpheus makes Neo see in the film: that human beings do need saving from their advanced reification and the advanced commodification that maintains all their illusions of free, autonomous individuals making significant choices about lifestyles. The truth is that human beings are farmed in order to be used as batteries to power a matrix that generates their own false consciousness of living in a Western liberal democracy.

Allow me then to make three observations. First, the Wachowski brothers and other film directors like Oliver Stone in *Natural Born Killers*, Fernando Meirelles in *City of God*, and Quentin Tarantino in *Pulp Fiction*, are, in their different ways, portraying how human agency in

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (London: Continuum, 2003) 41.

the West and Westernized cities across the world is increasingly dominated by economic “forces.” Second, because of this reification of human beings as laborers (energy out-puts), the commodification of all things is becoming ever more realized. Third, capitalism as a system is not about to collapse because of this realization (though it may be overturned by an alternative system).

The basis upon which I make these three observations is Marx’s own analysis of how the process of commodification is profoundly associated with the development of a religious worldview, an enchantment of the material conditions for sociality. Commodification, for Marx, is religious, and the commodification of religion itself is a late stage in the process of commodification as it begins to feed upon its most essential character. Therefore, if religion is enmeshed in the production of commodities, then the processes of both reification and commodification are (*pace* Castoriadis) almost complete, and the matrix for generating virtual reality almost established.

These are enormous claims, polemical claims, to which I will add two more. First, never has there been a greater need to rethink Marx on economics, motion, and history. Second, never has there been a greater need to develop a theological anthropology that can challenge both the frailty of Marx’s humanism<sup>8</sup> and the reduction of human beings by capitalism to units of productive power.

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware of some of the debates concerning this “humanism.” Certain French structuralists like Althusser wish to see Marxism as a profound anti-humanism, giving scant attention to any account Marx might have of “human nature” or agency. More recently, scholars like W. Peter Archibald [*Marx and the Missing Link: “Human Nature”* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989)] and Sean Sayers [*Marxism and Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 1998)] have sought to excavate an anthropology in Marx that is philosophical, sociological, and even psychological. I am persuaded from my own reading that despite Marx’s attacks on liberal bourgeois humanism—in *German Ideology*, for example—and his method of abstraction, he does work with a presupposed account of what it is to be human. At the heart of this account is a notion of freedom: to be human is to be a free agent able to make informed choices. Furthermore, this account, indebted both to Hegel and Feuerbach, is a development of the Enlightenment’s “man of reason.” It is this account that I term his “humanism.”

To back up these outrageous claims, I will first examine the nature of the production of commodities and the reification that ensues. Then I will address the question: In what ways does the commodification of religion now differ from its commodification in the past? The answer to this question will bear upon the advanced reification and social atomization that increasingly militates against the shared practices of a religious culture. *While commodification has always been constitutive of religion, I am arguing that we have now entered into a more advanced mode of this process.*

### *Commodification and Reification*

I begin with Marx's classic examination of value in the first part of *Capital* in order to demonstrate how the process of commodification fosters a tropology, that is, a world-view dominated by various forms of figurative representations, theatrical spectacle, or what Marx calls "personifications" that float free from and veil material reality, transposing the world of material and natural forces into a highly wrought allegory controlled by capitalist hoarding. I will point to the complexity of what is involved here, by drawing out four points about the nature of commodities as Marx observes them and adding a critical, even theological, comment.

First, the production of a commodity must be understood in relation to desire. For materials are worked upon and become commodities in order to satisfy a human want.<sup>9</sup> Some objects enter the exchange system and become commodities and others do not. Those that do not enter the exchange system remain either objects of utility or potential objects of exchange for which there is no demand as yet. This process is a politics not of objects but of desires. We can ask, then, what is the relationship between objects and desire such that some objects are chosen and some are not? Are all desires with respect to objects the same?

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<sup>9</sup> I will not distinguish here between desire and need, for at the level of production the differences between them become confused.

If they are not the same, then the commodity that emerges through the process of desiring is not the same either. The production of a religious artifact, a crucifix say, can be interpreted differently—an aid to worship, on the one hand, or a piece of costume jewelry, on the other. The way it is interpreted and desired will affect the manner in which that object is or has become a commodity.

In the same way, demand determines exchange-value, but all demands are not homogeneous. All values are not identical, and, against Marx who insists that capitalism requires a law of equivalence, some demands and values are incommensurate. What I am suggesting is that the production of commodities does not necessarily belong to one single economy, the capitalist one. There are *other* economies, *other* forms of exchange, and therefore *other* systems of exchange-value.

Second, the relationship between desire and the process of producing a commodity is affected through the manner in which a manufactured thing's use-value is exceeded by its exchange-value. As Marx observes, the character of this relationship continually changes with time, place (126), and the technologies of production such that the valuation of an object can seem mysterious or arbitrary. This raises two further questions: Are there various forms of production that may be, like demands and desires, incommensurable rather than equivalent? Are there different economies of exchange capable of generating different forms of excess-value? Marx makes clear that no value can stand autonomously: it stands in a matrix composed of the "motley mosaic of disparate and unconnected" (156) relative values of other commodities and under an equivalent value that acts as the common denominator of an evaluative system, a benchmark value. But the point to be made here is the infinite flux within which the "bodies of commodities" come to be marked by values instituted from forms of exchange and affected by the various means of production—values which are not transparent to themselves. "The isolated expression of A's value is thus transformed into the indefinitely expandable series of different simple expressions of value" (154).

What generates this indefinitely expandable series? Marx is aware that it is not the exchanges themselves (156); rather, it is value that regulates exchange. I suggest, and perhaps Marx does also, it is desire that

generates value. Excess-value is the product of desire. Values have to be made transparent by submitting them to a law of equivalence and a final translator of all equivalences: money/gold. This is the “dazzling” commodity, the commodity that cannot be looked upon and therefore whose character can be most concealed while omnipresent, like God.

In short, values have to be interpreted according to a univocal calculus, where interpretation means evaluation and evaluation means coming to an understanding of something. To this extent Marx’s unveiling of the metaphysics of the commodity parallels Schleiermacher’s investigations in hermeneutics: for both are concerned with how we come to understand, evaluate, and make judgements. And for Marx, as for Schleiermacher, “one has only understood what one has reconstructed in all its relationships and in its context”<sup>10</sup>—an infinite task that turns interpretation into a creative “art.” The analysis cannot, then, be scientific or based upon a claim to an objective space. The analysis is itself an art form, an interpretation, an evaluation of value. Marx’s evaluation of values is then profoundly interrelated with the conditions it is describing. The object of that interpretation is not the commodity and its evaluation, but the desire governing the production of the weighting given to the “body of the commodity.” What prolongs the endless task of such interpretation if not the circulations of desire composing the social relation?

A third observation follows from this: the process of producing commodities not only dematerializes the world—“not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values” (138)—it also establishes the social order as an allegory:

Here the persons exist for one another merely as representatives and hence owners of commodities. . . the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other. (179)

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 228.

Marx's allusion here is to the theatre of classical Greece and the ornate masks or *personae* worn by the actors. The allegory, like all allegories, is a tissue of rhetorical operations that represent and symbolize by various forms of figurative speech. In short, metonymic acts of substitution lie at the heart of the system of relational and equivalent values. All relations between commodities are analogical, governed by the univocity of money/gold. Reification is personification, and the operative relations between commodities is anthropomorphized as objects become "endowed with a will and a soul of their own" (1003). Exchange-values are "mode[s] of expression" and "form[s] of appearance" (127). Capitalism, then, generates virtual realities as "value...transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyph" (167). The unmasking, literally, of the characters on the economic stage is necessary in order for there to be a society at all, for society as such under capitalism is what Benedict Anderson termed an "imaginary community"—a fiction.

Marx's project is to rescue the social and establish its materiality, which now is concealed beneath the allegorizing. The tool for this job is interpretation, judging "the bearers of these economic relations," but the project is endless. Rules for the interpretation of this continuing allegorization are needed, and this is what he attempts to provide. The hermeneutical rules attempt to re-establish an object in the nakedness of its use-value only, but the rules and the evaluations made in and through devising them perpetuate the allegory, for they cannot escape the rhetorical operations that they too perform. The analysis is not executed in a neutral or objective space; it is profoundly interrelated with the conditions it is evaluating. Marx's books are themselves implicated in the production of commodities and therefore the extension of characters on the economic stage. What this means is that the social—and the use-value of objects that pass between and constitute the social—is never there as such; its materiality—so necessary for judgments to be made and true understanding to be recovered from "beneath" false states of consciousness—is always deferred. There is no escaping the matrix generated by capitalism's virtual reality: to establish the materiality of social relations becomes a secularized eschatological task comparable to the establishment of the kingdom of God. The task becomes Messianic—nothing less than the overthrowing of the idols.

The fourth and final observation on the opening part of *Capital* is that all commodities are characterized by their fetishism. The idol and the fetish establish a *religious* worldview; they are the necessary obverse of the icon and the sacrament. Capitalism generates what Marx calls the “mystical,” “mysterious,” “enigmatic,” or “fantastic” forms of relation between things, whose only analogy is “the misty realm of religion” (165). Capitalism generates a world of “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (163) in which all things are subjected to the authority of “the universal commodity”: money. Money is not a regulative but a constitutive transcendental. In the religious world of commodity-values, it wears the mask of the antichrist—the beast of the Book of Revelation (181). The Apocalypse of Capitalism is being challenged then by the eschatology of a new community or a restored community—since Marx believes that at one time in history this community existed—in which relations no longer exist in “reciprocal isolation and foreignness” (184).

As such, Capitalism is inseparable from Gnosticism—only there is a subtle inversion with respect to the body and the soul, an inversion that is worthy of Foucault. For it is capitalist evil that moves through history like Hegel’s *Absolute Geist* and imprisons the goodness of the material order; the body is captive to the soul in the production (understood both in terms of economic process and theatrical staging) of commodity-values. And like Hegel’s *Geist*, the magic of the money fetish (Marx’s language) lies in its power to vanish, “leaving no trace behind” (187). It erases its own presence by becoming “visible and dazzling to our eyes” (187) like Jean-Luc Marion’s idol that can only reflect the desire and retroject the values projected onto it.<sup>11</sup> Money has not only the “appearance of value,” like other commodities; it is “the form of appearance of the value of commodities” (184). It participates in a Platonic metaphysics in which its abstraction is consummated by its disappearance. The power of capitalism, in other words, lies in the omnipresence of an

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<sup>11</sup> See Jean-Luc Marion’s analyses of the idol in *L’idole et la distance; cinq études* (Paris: Grasset, 1977) and *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1995).

absence that circulates in and through desire and is constitutive of desire—an absence that is at once demonized and adored. What the power of capitalism effects is a trade in bad faith, winning allegiance, through seduction, to the incantatory credo of credit.

### *The Commodification of Religion*

Having examined the nature of the production of commodities and the reification that ensues, the correlation between capitalism and the fabrication of a religious worldview clarifies itself. Marx's analyses of the elements and the processes involved furnish us with that clarification. But let me return to a point I made much earlier about the possibility of economies of exchange; other modes of desire; other systems of evaluation; and the production of values that while unable to disengage themselves completely from the production of commodities, fetishism, and reification, nevertheless remain incommensurate to the seductions of capitalism. The religion that issues from fetishism is parasitic upon, and a mimicry of, a more authentic set of symbolic practices, artifacts, and beliefs. The idol is made possible by the icon—and vice versa. This mimetic rivalry becomes important when trying a) to assess the contemporary commodification of religion with respect to past forms of the same and b) to answer the question concerning what, if anything, is different between past and present forms.

While recognizing and agreeing with Marx's seventh thesis on Feuerbach—"the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product"—religion is not simply a matter of feeling or sentiment. This is a very disembedded understanding of religion. It is a view of religion, fostered by pietism and early Romantic thinkers like Schleiermacher, that plays directly into the religious world issuing from fetish-commodities—a world of abstractions, enigmas, and swirling mists. It is a very individualistic understanding of religion forged by Protestantism, as Marx himself acknowledges: "Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly in its bourgeois development, i.e. in Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion" (172). But this is a highly distinctive view of religion that fails to recognize and take account of the material practices of a faith, the technologies

for the forging of persons as social and theological agents, the communities of believers, the circulation of sacred texts and artifacts. If these aspects of religion are taken into consideration, it is possible to see that while religion always remains a social product, the processes of its socializing and the economies of its desires are excessive to the ideologies of a hegemonic capitalism and bourgeois liberal humanism (“the cult of man”). In some ways the products of this socializing and its technologies may be not only excessive but also resistant to the generation of commodity-values, desiring and promoting alternative commodity-values that, in turn, constitute commodities themselves differently. Indeed such communities of believers may already constitute, or be closer to constituting, the material sociality that is the aim of Marx’s critique of capitalism. What would be the differences between this religious world and the realms of mystification conjured up by the dazzling magic of money? What would be the relation between the circulation of desires in this religious world and “the *perpetuum mobile* of circulation” (226) that issues from “gold as [society’s] Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of its innermost principle of life” (230)?

Let me return to the contrast between the icon and the idol. While the icon is a symbolic representation of a transcendent horizon, indeed, a symbolic performance drawing viewers beyond themselves and towards that horizon, the idol symbolizes nothing. The idol is a representation, but it is not a symbol. It reflects back only what is projected onto it—like the dazzling fetish of money. It does not signify. It does not communicate. It remains a representation, a sign endlessly reflecting back on its own status as sign. It produces nothing. It reproduces only itself.

Allow me to call this fetish not a symbol but a simulacra.<sup>12</sup> Simulacra announce, as Deleuze notes, “the failure of representation...the loss of identities.”<sup>13</sup> “The problem no longer has to do with the distinction

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<sup>12</sup> I evidently have the work of Foucault, Deleuze, and Baudrillard on simulacrum in mind. I am aware that their understandings of what constitutes simulacra are not identical—though they are close, and Foucault’s account is evidently indebted to Deleuze’s.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) xix.

Essence-Appearance or Model-Copy. This distinction operates completely within the world of representation. Rather it has to do with undertaking the subversion of this world—the ‘twilight of the idols.’”<sup>14</sup> Simulacra seduce. As Baudrillard suggests, they dazzle in such a way that any object they are the index of disappears in the spectacle so that “signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real.”<sup>15</sup>

Marx does not develop an order of signs, but his observations on the uninterrupted flow of commodity metamorphoses (244) that emerges from the bourgeois desire for money (“As the hart pants after fresh water, so pants his [the bourgeois’s] soul after money” [236]) clearly indicate that the fetish of gold produces a world of simulacra governed by a rampant libidinal drive. Money or gold is “capable of being replaced by valueless symbols of itself” (225-6). Paper money is a symbol of a symbol the circulations of which encourage imaginary expressions of quantities of gold that never materialize as such (225). It is the alienating and alienable commodity, “because it is all other commodities divested of their shape, the product of their universal alienation” (205). It makes commodities as such disappear by “mirror[ing] itself in the bodies of all...commodities” (205), conjuring up a world of imaginary prices.

Commodification produces a spectogram or hologram of religion, a bloodless and disembodied “religious cast of mind”: a fantasy of religion, which, like an atmosphere, demands only that we breathe it in. We cannot say the real is enchanted, for there is no place locatable outside this enchantment. Marx continually depicts the immanent laws of this world in religious metaphors such that his own representations mirror the mirroring activity of all commodity fetishism. He cannot find a place for an alternative social world, materially grounded, because his own writing circulates within and fosters the production of the orders of simulation and simulacrum, the theatre of spectacle. What is produced by this simulation is not simply the religion

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Athlone, 1990) 262.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993) 12.

of commodification, the pop-transcendence of capitalism, but the commodification of religion—the metamorphosis or transubstantiation (Marx’s two favorite words for describing what takes place through commodity-exchange) of those socially and culturally embedded practices of faith into a misty realm. His critique of capitalism, which is simultaneously a critique of religion, is only made possible by taking up a position that mirrors from within the body of religious discourses, turning it into a bourgeois commodity. The communist can announce himself only in and as a capitalist; the atheist can only announce himself in and as one initiated into the mysteries of religion. The immanent circulations of desire only fold back upon themselves in an eternal reoccurrence of the same. This is the order of simulacrum.

### *Conclusion*

We can now return to Castoriadis’ observation that reification, “the essential tendency of capitalism, can never be wholly realized.” My analyses of Marx’s account of the operations of capitalism suggest that this is mistaken: everything is already commodified, and all things already compose a virtual reality within the circulations of capitalism. No “genuinely human activity” can be located within the order of simulation and simulacrum; a genuine and material sociality is still to be found and is continually deferred. The last object that capitalism commodifies is the object that constitutes its inner identity: religion. In the commodification of religion, therefore, capitalism narcissistically consummates itself.

While Marx wrote, and for a long time afterwards, embedded practices of faith resisted this consummation and resisted the marketing of religion itself. But capitalism, as Marx saw, continually erodes this alternative, resistant sociality in its march towards “universal alienation.” I predict, on the basis of my examination of Marx, that the re-enchantment in contemporary Western culture that takes place in and through the marketing of the resources of religion (its artifacts, myths, symbols, vocabularies, cosmologies, beliefs, and technologies) will only develop further. We are entering a profoundly post-secular age.

The messianic mission in *The Matrix* is a case in point: “Are you the one we have been waiting for, Neo?” The order of simulation and simulacrum that fosters dematerialization, atomism, the disappearance of things, and universal alienation will become increasingly pervasive. A culture is rapidly being produced and disseminated that is profoundly religious, profoundly capitalist, and, because of both of those events, profoundly virtual. We are not entering the twilight of the idols but the dawn of an unprecedented idolatry, when “false Christs and false prophets shall rise and show signs and wonders to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect” (Mark 13:22). Marx points the way here, and that’s why we need him.

Only a counter-culture, based within practices and desires that are excessive to capitalism, can resist the immanent vortex of this *Zirkulationsprozess*. No socialist “cult of the human” will ever resist it, for socialism’s discourses, technologies, and practices are made possible only by being parasitic upon capitalism. All socialism’s moves have already been predicted, checked, and absorbed within capitalism, as Slavoj Žižek has recently reminded us:

Capitalism and Communism are not two different historical realities, two species of “instrumental reason”—instrumental reason as such is capitalist, grounded in capitalist relations; and “actually existing Socialism” failed because it was ultimately a subspecies of capitalism, an ideological attempt to “have one’s cake and eat it,” to break out of capitalism while retaining its key ingredient [pure unleashed productivity].<sup>16</sup>

This situation is made evident in the fact that socialism has always remained *chic*. I suggest that is why we need critical theologies—theologies as critique and theologies able to be critical about themselves,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 1999) 19.

<sup>17</sup> I owe this insight and even terminology to Dr. Michael Hoelzl.

theologies that advance alternative socialities and ways of being human that are not merely human.

But as a concluding coda let me emphasize that theological discourse, however critical, does not bear the holy grail across the wastelands of late capitalist democratic culture. It is not the antidote to commodification, or even reification. As I said at the beginning of this essay, “commodification has always been constitutive of religion”—fetishism is first and foremost a religious phenomenon. And this leads me to recognize that there is the smell of moral self-righteousness throughout this essay. For what seems presupposed is that commodification (and reification) are bad things, evidence of corruption in the social body. Castoriadis evidently believes this and pits his own humanism against such wicked forces.

Marx is clear that even among primitive nomadic tribes, Imperial Rome, and Christendom’s Middle Ages, the circulation of commodities becomes necessary. While commodification is inevitable, it is not in itself a social evil. Moral enquiry and moral debate are only possible on the basis of the evaluations of goods, situations, and behaviors. The operation of a judiciary requires both the atomization of individuals within larger social groupings and their reification. Commodification and reification are not in themselves wrongs; nor are they simply the products of capitalism. Capitalism produces certain forms of the circulation of commodities and certain forms of the reification of persons. Theological discourse, and theological praxis more generally, cannot escape either commodification or reification. Escape is not the point; rather the point is to produce forms of the circulation of commodities and the reification of persons that critique and resist the social and cultural effects of rampant capitalism.

Christian theology is a case in point. For some of its key doctrinal moments weave notions of exchange, debt, repayment, and redemption into accounts of “making good.” Capitalism does not have the monopoly on economics—and in that lie all our hopes for cultural transformation.