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FALSE RELIGIONS AND TRUE POLITICS: COUNTERING CAPITALISM AS RELIGION

I

Walter Benjamin begins his 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion" with an enigmatic paragraph: after stating that in capitalism may be discerned a religion in the sense that "capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so called religions offered answers," he refuses to support this thesis with any explanation: "The proof of the religious structure of capitalism," he writes, "[...] would still lead even today to the folly [*Abweg*] of an endless universal polemic." He then closes the paragraph with an even more enigmatic sentence: "We cannot draw closed the net in which we are caught. Later on, however, we shall be able to gain an overview of it" (GS VI: 100 / SW 1: 288).<sup>1</sup>

The fragment takes as its springboard the famous thesis proposed by Max Weber in two bulky essays from 1904 and 1905 and then published together under the title *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, according to which the "spirit" of capitalism, that is, its emphasis on work as a value in itself, can be traced back to the ethics of Protestantism, and in particular of Calvinism.<sup>2</sup> Capitalism thus represents for Weber a secularization of Protestant ethics. Benjamin right away distances himself from this thesis, stating that capitalism is not only a formation "conditioned" by capitalism, that is, it is not secularized religion, but is instead a religion in the strict sense, or better a "religious phenomenon" (GS VI:100/SW 1:288). Weber's paradigm of secularization is replaced by Benjamin with that of metamorphosis: "The Christianity of the Reformation period," he writes, "did not favor the growth of capitalism; instead it transformed itself into capitalism" (GS VI:102/SW 1:290). But why does he refuse to support this thesis with proofs and evidence? "Capitalism as Religion" is a series of work notes and not a text prepared for publication; it is therefore extremely dense and often obscure and raises more questions than it provides answers. I believe that the obscurity of the first paragraphs can be (at least partially) clarified and an explanation of Benjamin's refusal to explain can be provided, and this is what I will attempt to do in what follows. All explanations must start, however, with a contextualization of the fragment within Benjamin's thoughts and writings of the early 1920s.

II

On the basis of the date of publication of the books Benjamin cites (the most recent, Erich Unger's *Politik und Metaphysik*, appeared in January 1921) and on the list of books Benjamin read in that year, the editors of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* dated the fragment to mid-1921 (see GS VI:690-91). Michael Löwy argues that Benjamin took the title "Capitalism as Religion"

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Benjamin's works are made parenthetically in the text both to the German text of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7. vols in 15 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972-1989) or the *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6. vols., eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995-2000) (hereafter cited as *GS* and *GB*, respectively), and to the English translation of the *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003) (hereafter cited as *SW*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992)

from Ernst Bloch's book *Thomas Münzer as Theologian of Revolution*, published precisely in 1921<sup>3</sup>: in the conclusion of the section entitled "Über Calvin und die Geld-Ideologie" ("On Calvin and the Money Ideology"), Bloch writes, in fact, that the Calvinist reformation planted the seed of the destruction of Christianity and introduced "the elements of a new 'religion': that of capitalism as religion [*Kapitalismus als Religion*] and Mammon's Church."<sup>4</sup> Löwy then quotes a letter Benjamin sent to Scholem on November 27, 1921, in which he writes: "Recently [Bloch] gave me, during his first visit here, the complete proofs of his 'Münzer' and I've begun to read it" (GB 2:213). Löwy therefore argues that the date of composition of the fragment should be moved to the end of 1921. Werner Hamacher, however, is not so sure of it. Bloch and Benjamin first met in Switzerland, where both spent the most part of the war years, and immediately started an intense intellectual exchange. At the request of Bloch, Benjamin had already written a review (today lost) of his *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), of which he considered the book on Thomas Münzer a sort of "coda." Hamacher therefore argues that also the opposite hypothesis could be plausible, that is, that Benjamin might have coined the formula and then Bloch used it in his *Münzer* book.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the direction of the "debt," the reference to Bloch allows the fragment to be placed specifically within the project to which Benjamin, in these years, referred to as "*Politik*." It is possible that it was precisely the review of *The Spirit of Utopia* – but more in general the intellectual exchange with Bloch – that led Benjamin to plan in the early 1920s an extensive study which was never completed, but the structure of which can be reconstructed from a number of allusions and observations found in Benjamin's correspondence and, in particular, in his letters to Scholem. The first mention is, however, in a letter to Bernd Kampfmeyer from September 1920, in which Benjamin says that he is planning an essay on "The Demolition of Violence" ("*Abbau der Gewalt*") (GB 2: 101). In a famous letter to Scholem from September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1920, Benjamin describes the plan of the project and states that the third part of his *Politics* will consist of a philosophical critique of Paul Scheerbart's novel *Lesabéndio*, whereas the second part would be titled "The True Politics" ("*Die wahre Politik*"), which in turn would be divided into two sections, "The Demolition of Violence" and "Teleology Without Final End" ("*Teleologie ohne Endzweck*") (GB 2: 109). On December 29, he writes then that he has completed "The True Politician" ("*Der wahre Politiker*," also lost), which perhaps was to constitute the first part of the project (GB 2: 119). The section on "The Demolition of Violence" seems to coincide with the essay "Critique of Violence" ("*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*"), which Benjamin mentioned for the first time in January 1921, and which would be then published in August of the same year in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, the only part of the project to appear in print.<sup>6</sup> As I will show later, this contextualization will prove essential to understand the first paragraph.

### III

The most interesting aspect of the fragment is the identification of a specific structure of capitalism as religion, on which we can make some precise and definite observations, beginning precisely with the "anxieties, torments, and disturbances" to which capitalism

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Löwy, "Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber," *Historical Materialism* 17.1 (2009): 61. The same hypothesis is also briefly supported by Joachim von Soosten, "Schwarzer Freitag: Die Diabolik der Erlösung und die Symbolik des Geldes," in *Kapitalismus als Religion*, ed. Dirk Baecker (Berlin: Kadmos, 2003), 290n6.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1962 [1921]), 170.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Hamacher, "Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion,'" trans. Kirk Wetters, *Diacritics* 32.3/4 (2002): 89n6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also GB 2:148, 174, 360, 382, 385; GB 3:9. On the genesis and structure of the project see Uwe Steiner, "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political," trans. Colin Sample, *New German Critique* 83 (2001): 43-88.

would provide a response. Various commentators have linked this description of religion to the last paragraph of the fragment, where capitalism is compared to paganism, since, just like this latter, capitalism does not conceive religion as bound to “moral” or “superior” interests, but rather to immediately “practical” ones (GS VI: 103 / SW 1: 290). Capitalism, for Uwe Steiner, would thus constitute a “re-paganization” of religion, to which Benjamin would oppose in these years a truly “moral” or even “religious” attitude.<sup>7</sup> This conjecture can also be confirmed, among other things, by a passage from “Fate and Character,” a text most likely written in 1919 but published precisely in 1921 in *Die Argonauten*. Here, Benjamin characterizes the sphere of fate as extraneous to the concepts of happiness, bliss, and innocence, and concludes:

But an order whose sole intrinsic concepts are misfortune and guilt, and within which there is no conceivable path of liberation (for insofar as something is fate, it is misfortune and guilt) – such an order cannot be religious, no matter how the misunderstood concept of guilt appears to suggest the contrary. (GS II/1: 174 / SW 1: 203)

Benjamin’s critique is not aimed thus at religion in itself (for example, as “opium of the people”), but rather at a certain structure, probably heathenish, which brings together capitalism and the “so-called” religions of the past. This structure, Benjamin writes, presents three main characters, which will then become four (we must remember that these are work notes, and thus Benjamin must have come up with the fourth trait when drafting them): 1. capitalism is a cultic religion, with no dogma and no theology, that is, pure ritual; 2. this cult is perpetual and knows no pauses; 3. it is a cult that does not offer redemption but instead produces *Schuld*, in its double signification of “guilt” and “debt”; 4. the God of this cult is involved in the guilt/debt and thus is kept hidden.

The first operative term of this characterization is undoubtedly “cult,” from which in a certain sense the other three features derive. A cult that raises the earning of money to a religious rite, that needs no ideological legitimization (it has neither dogmatics nor theology), but justifies itself merely through its own functioning, and that actualizes itself in the form of a utilitarianism that takes up a sacred connotation: everything takes on a meaning only, and immediately (*unmittelbar*), in relation to the utilitarian cult, which means that what is not deemed as “useful” takes on almost “sacrilegious” traits. Capitalism thus does not demand adhesion to a creed; it is the actions themselves, the everyday practice, that take on a cultic character. This trait reminds one once again of paganism, just like the “polytheist” iconography of capitalism. Capitalism has no theology but has nonetheless a number of saints – the images on the banknotes become sacred, holy images, and from their ornamentation speaks the spirit of capitalism (GS VI:102/SW 1:290). This idea returns in the aphorism “*Steuerberatung*” (“Tax Advice”) of *One Ways Street*, where the “solemn earnestness” displaying itself on the banknotes is described as “ornamenting the façade of hell” (*Fassadenarchitektur der Hölle*) (GS IV/1:139/SW 1:481).

From capitalism’s totalization of meaning derives the second character of this cultic religion, which makes up its apotheosis, that is, the permanent duration of the cult: there are no “weekdays,” that is, no days in which the cult is not celebrated, but every day demands the obsessive celebration of the rite. As noted, among others, by Burkhardt Lindner, this means that the difference between profane time and cultic time, between sacred and profane, is

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<sup>7</sup> Uwe Steiner, “Kapitalismus als Religion,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), 169. The same argument is also supported by Norbert Bolz, “Der Kapitalismus – eine Erfindung von Theologen?,” in *Kapitalismus als Religion*, ed. Dirk Baecker, 196.

erased.<sup>8</sup> At this point Benjamin uses an enigmatic French expression, which the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (followed by English translators and the editors of the *Selected Writings*) have interpreted as “*sans rêve et sans merci*,” without dream or mercy. Steiner notes that this expression is not an idiomatic expression in French, and moreover it finds no context in Benjamin’s vocabulary of these years (his fascination for dreams and their intrinsic and essential connection to capitalism dates to the 1930s), and thus that this reading makes no sense. He proposes, then, to read the expression as “*sans trêve et sans merci*,” without truce or mercy.<sup>9</sup> This is, in fact, an idiomatic expression which, as Chad Kautzer notes, dates at least to the medieval chivalry decalogue which imposed the knight to fight the infidels “*sans trêve ni merci*.”<sup>10</sup> According to Samuel Weber, Benjamin had certainly found this expression in one of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*, “Le crépuscule du soir” (“Dusk”), which he was translating in these years.<sup>11</sup> The translation was completed precisely in 1921 and would be then published in 1923 by the publisher Richard Weißbach with the famous introduction “The Task of the Translator.” Baudelaire’s poem in fact emphasizes how not even the evening brings rest and a “truce” to those who toiled all day long, since the evening is the time at which “corrupting demons” awake who, “like men of great affairs” (*comme de gens d’affaire*), fill the night with sorrow:

*Et les voleurs, qui n’ont ni trêve ni merci  
Vont bientôt commencer leur travail, eux aussi  
Et forcer doucement les portes et les caisses  
Pour vivre quelques jours et vêtir leur maîtresses.*

Robbers who show no pity to their prey  
Get ready for their nightly work-a-day  
Of cracking safes and deftly forcing doors,  
To live a few days more and dress their whores.<sup>12</sup>

As in Baudelaire’s poem, in capitalism there is no truce nor mercy, the work/cult never stops, not even at the gates of night; the sacral pomp of the rite (work/consumption) is permanently displayed with no limit in space and time. The time of capitalism, just like money (*time is money*), has become a universal equivalent, and thus absolutely uniform and indifferent. From this “quantified” time (which thereby loses all and every qualitative connotation), there is no way out.

#### IV

The third trait of the capitalist structure presents the central term of the fragment, *Schuld*, in all its “demonic ambiguity” (*GS VI:102/SW 1:289*): both “guilt” and “debt.” The soteriology of the capitalist cult consists for Benjamin in implicating existence more and more into the fall (*Sturz*) of a guilt-making, which is at the same time a debt-making (and vice versa), until the very God

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<sup>8</sup> Burkhardt Lindner, “Der 11.9.2001 oder Kapitalismus als Religion,” in *Ereignis. Eine fundamentale Kategorie der Zeiterfahrung. Anspruch und Aporien*, ed. Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2003), 202.

<sup>9</sup> Uwe Steiner, “Kapitalismus als Religion. Anmerkungen zu einem Fragment Walter Benjamins,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 72.1 (1998): 157.

<sup>10</sup> Kautzer adds this in a note to his own translation of Benjamin’s fragment, in Eduardo Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2005), 262n2. Kautzer refers to the catalogue of chivalry composed by Léon Gautier in the nineteenth century (*Chivalry*, trans. Henry Frith [London: Routledge, 1891]).

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 255.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 192-93.

of the cult is implicated in this movement that is in itself inextinguishable (like guilt and debt), and is therefore not salvation but desperation and ruin.

*Schuld* is a term that frequently repeats in Benjamin's reflections of these years. Strongly influenced by the philosophy of the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, Benjamin places *Schuld* in a constellation that includes the concept of "fate" (*Schicksal*) and the order of law, which both belong to the sphere of "myth." Right after the passage from "Fate and Character" quoted above, Benjamin writes: "The laws of fate – misfortune and guilt – are elevated by law to measures of the person" (GS II/1:174/SW 1:201). This guilt is not however that of the ethical sphere, since there is no correlation between fate and the concept that in the ethical sphere associates with guilt, that is, innocence (*Unschuld*). The order of law is rather "a residue of the demonic stage of human existence" (GS II/1:174/SW 1:201). A corollary of this axiom is that "[l]aw condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context [*Schuldzusammenhang*] of the living" (GS II/1:175/SW 1:202). These theses will return in the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, written between 1919 and 1922, and in "Critique of Violence," where "mere life" is defined as "the marked bearer of guilt" (*die gezeichnete Träger der Verschuldung*) (GS II/1:202/SW 1:251). In these passages the connotation of *Schuld* is tipped no doubt towards the side of "guilt" (note also that in German *Schuld* as "debt" is often in the plural, *Schulden*), but a fragment written some years before in Switzerland, in the Summer of 1918, helps us relate the sphere of myth and *Schuld* to the religion of capitalism. The relationship between money and guilt within pagan religions already contains the "demonic ambiguity" of a guilt that is in itself always already debt. The capitalist cult, as guilt-inducing/debt-inducing, belongs to the sphere of pagan religions and, with its universalization of guilt/debt, drives back humanity into a "demonic stage"; it is, therefore, as Joachim von Soosten writes, a relapse into the sphere of myth.

Where there are pagan religions, there are concepts of natural guilt (*natürliche Schuld* *begriffe*). Life is somehow always guilty, its punishment is death. A form of natural guilt is that of sexuality, for pleasure and the production of life. Another is that of money, for the mere possibility to exist (GS VI:56).

However, Benjamin was not the first to play with the ambiguity of the term *Schuld*. In the second essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (published in 1887), titled "'Guilt', 'bad conscience' and related matters," Nietzsche already states that "the main moral concept '*Schuld*' ('guilt') descends from the very material concept of '*Schulden*' ('debts')," and genealogically traces back the origin of the moral concepts of guilt, conscience, and duty to the sphere of the law of obligations. It is "the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the very conception of a 'legal subject,'" that is the basis of the normative construction of Western ethics, "and itself refers back to the basic forms of buying, selling, bartering, trade and traffic."<sup>13</sup> Guilt would therefore be the condition of those who feel indebted. Moreover, Nietzsche relates the greatness of the concept of god and divinity to the "feeling of indebtedness [*Schulden*] towards a deity," to the point that "The advent of the Christian God as the maximal god yet achieved, thus also brought about the appearance of the greatest feeling of indebtedness [*Schuldgefühl*] on earth."<sup>14</sup>

But already twenty years earlier Marx had devoted an entire part of the first book of the *Capital* (1867) – the one on the "so-called primitive accumulation" which some appropriately define as *Schuld* *kapitel*<sup>15</sup> – to the centrality of the concept of *Schuld*/*Schulden* in capitalism, while also playing with the ambiguity of the term. What makes money into "capital," that is into money that utilizes itself and multiplies, is for Marx "national debt," which has become the true *credo* of capital: want of faith in the national debt takes the place of the blasphemy against the Holy

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39-40.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Hamacher, "Guilt History," 91; Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Asceticism and Capitalism*, trans. Arianna Bove (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), 114.

Ghost, which may not be forgiven.<sup>16</sup> As Hamacher notes, with this structural metamorphosis from the secular-economic credit to a sacramental credo, Marx provides the diagnosis of the transformation of capitalism into a religious phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, just like Nietzsche, and anticipating somehow Max Weber, Marx puts the Christian God at the center of this transformation: "Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man, more especially in its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, &c, is the most fitting form of religion" for a society based upon the production of commodities.<sup>18</sup>

V

It is conceivable that Benjamin knew these two sources, at least indirectly.<sup>19</sup> And yet, precisely Nietzsche and Marx, with the addition of Freud, are labelled in Benjamin's fragment as "high priests" of the capitalist cult. The choice of these three names is rather surprising, since they are precisely those whom Paul Ricoeur and Michel Foucault will define, a few decades later, as "masters of suspicion" and in a certain sense fathers of modernity.<sup>20</sup> For Benjamin they are instead the high priests of capitalism because they begin, in all conscience, to realize it in its fullness; that is, their philosophies "mimetically" represent the capitalist religious structure and push its immanent logic (that of guilt/debt) to the extreme consequences.<sup>21</sup> Here two terms, construed as mutually opposed, are fundamental: *Umkehr* and *Steigerung*. The former literally means "change of course," "turn" (*Kehre*), but presents also a strong religious connotation, since it also translated the Latin term *conversio* and the Hebrew *teshuvah*. This fact led some commentators to read (and translate) it as *metanoia*, that is, (religious) conversion in the sense of repentance and atonement, but this reading confines Benjamin's analysis to a religious debate and reduces his attack on capitalism to a polemic between true and false religions. Hamacher thus proposes to read *Umkehr* as "turning away," as radical caesura and total rupture with the logic of guilt/debt,<sup>22</sup> and Birger Priddat as *re-volutio* and *crisis*.<sup>23</sup> *Steigerung* means instead increase, elevation, increment, thus enhancement, strengthening, and intensification. Benjamin argues that the philosophies of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud enact an enhancement, strengthening, and intensification of the capitalist logic of guilt/debt and do not represent at all an *Umkehr*, a rupture with it.

For Benjamin, the Nietzschean *Übermensch* does not expiate the guilt/debt, but heroically takes it upon himself and, in this sense, in his tragic heroism, most radically fulfills the religious

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, volume 35 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 742.

<sup>17</sup> Hamacher, "Guilt History," 92.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> On the cultural *milieu* in which Benjamin moved in these years see Steiner, "The True Politician." A propos of Marx's passage from the part on the "so-called primitive accumulation," Steiner ("Kapitalismus als Religion. Anmerkungen zu einem Fragment Walter Benjamins," 161) notes that Benjamin could have read some references to it in Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, where this part is briefly analyzed – though without explicitly quoting this very passage – in the pages immediately preceding those Benjamin refers to in "Capitalism as Religion" (GS VI: 102 / SW 1: 290). Cf. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167ff.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32; Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1998), 269-78.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Steiner, "Kapitalismus als Religion," 171; Lindner, "Der 11.9.2001 oder Kapitalismus als Religion," 218.

<sup>22</sup> Hamacher, "Guilt History," 99.

<sup>23</sup> Birger Priddat, "Deus Creditor: Walter Benjamin's 'Kapitalismus als Religion,'" in *Kapitalismus als Religion*, ed. Dirk Baecker, 226.

essence of capitalism. According to Löwy, this strengthening only intensifies the capitalist *hubris*, the cult of power and of infinite expansion.<sup>24</sup> Precisely in opposition to this Nietzschean strengthening, one must read the following definition in Benjamin's more or less contemporary fragment "World and Time" (ca. 1919-1920): "My definition of politics: the fulfilment of an unimproved [*ungesteigerte*] humanity" (GS VI: 99 / SW 1: 226). The logic of Marx's thought is not dissimilar: the *Communist Manifesto* explicitly describes socialism as heir of capitalism. The bourgeois relations of production, write Marx and Engels, have become too narrow to accommodate the productive forces; they have in fact become a hindrance to these forces, which thus "rebel" to the old relationships: "The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself." The logic of the capitalist productive forces remains unchanged. In fact, it is precisely this logic that demands a change. Moreover, the working class does not constitute an alternative to the capitalist bourgeoisie, but it is rather the product of it: "not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians."<sup>25</sup> Socialism is therefore the logic of capitalism without capitalism and only brings to the extreme consequences the logic of the "simple and compound interest" (GS VI:102/SW 1:289) which is none other than that of guilt/debt.<sup>26</sup>

As for Freud, Benjamin argues that the "repressed," the foundation of psychoanalytic theory, equates, for an analogy that he does not develop, to capital. This analogy is nonetheless related to the generating of interests in capital, in turn assimilated to the repression of the "idea of sin" (GS VI:101/SW 1:289). As it has been pointed out,<sup>27</sup> above all in *Totem and Taboo*, and more precisely in the myth of the primal horde that concludes the chapter "The Return of Totemism in Childhood," Freud places at the origin not only of religion, but of social organization *tout court*, the original guilt (*Urschuld*) for the murdering of the father. This is "the same great event with which civilization began and which, since it occurred, has not allowed mankind a moment's rest," an event that organizes the social structure at all levels: "Society [is] now based on complicity in the common crime; religion [is] based on the sense of guilt [*Schuldgefühl*] and the remorse attaching to it; while morality [is] based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt."<sup>28</sup> For Freud, this structure is ultimately a more or less rational way of managing the *Schuldgefühl*, which is and remains ineliminable. The Freudian diagnosis, therefore, is also unable to free humanity from the logic of guilt and indebtedness, but rather reinforces it and places it as the foundation of all social, religious, and political systems, and thus absolutizes it.<sup>29</sup>

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24 Löwy, "Capitalism as Religion," 69.

25 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore in cooperation with Friedrich Engels, with an Introduction by David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 42-43.

26 It is true that Benjamin in these years knew little and poorly of Marx's *oeuvre*, and that probably here he is modelling his criticisms on the anarcho-syndicalism of George Sorel and above all of Gustav Landauer. After reading, in 1924, Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* Benjamin will change his mind on Marx's theory, or at least on Marx's work, though this critique of socialism will transfer from then on onto social democracy.

27 E.g. by Uwe Steiner, "Die Grenzen des Kapitalismus. Kapitalismus, Religion und Politik in Benjamins Fragment 'Kapitalismus als Religion,'" in *Kapitalismus als Religion*, ed. Dirk Baecker, 43-44. See also Steiner's other texts on Benjamin's fragment.

28 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 2001), 168, 170.

29 For an in-depth analysis of the theories of Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Weber in relation to Benjamin's fragment, see Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living*, 113ff.

VI

If God himself is caught in the logic of guilt/debt (and therefore – fourth trait of the capitalist structure – he must be kept hidden; GS VI:101/SW 1:289), then no expiation (*Entsühnung*) can be found in the religion of capitalism. But neither in a reformation of it (which, Hamacher notes, should be a reformation of the Reformation<sup>30</sup>), since in this religion there exists no element that is free from the logic of guilt/debt and that is thus “reformable.” And not even abjuration constitutes a way out, since abjuration remains in a relationship of dependency with the logic of the abjured structure; moreover, abjuration is only individual, not communal, and therefore does not stop the god of the capital from exercising his power on society.<sup>31</sup> The only way out then should be sought in what Benjamin thrice defines as *Umkehr*. The fragment does not give hints about the nature of this *Umkehr*, but it is possible nonetheless to make some considerations about it.

If the hypothesis is correct that this fragment belongs to the major and unfinished project of Benjamin’s *Politik*, then we can propose to identify the *Umkehr* with politics itself: that is, only a “true” politics could constitute a radical rupture with the logic of guilt/debt, only a “true” politics could oppose the capitalist religion. Based on this hypothesis, we can finally interpret the obscure incipit of the fragment. According to Steiner, it is perhaps for this reason that Benjamin declines to provide the proof of the religious essence of capitalism and to enter an endless universal polemic, which would probably focus on the meaning/essence of religion or of the “true” religion, and would distract (it would be an *Abweg*, a “folly” in the sense of “wrong way”) from the true, *political* task of the analysis.<sup>32</sup> Capitalism as religion cannot be countered with another, perhaps “true” religion, but only with “true” politics. For Steiner, the fragmentary bibliographical notes of the second part of the fragment suggest that Benjamin’s reflections did proceed precisely in this direction.<sup>33</sup> If the texts of Max Weber, Bruno Archibald Fuchs, Ernst Troeltsch, Gustav von Schönberg, and Adam Müller can refer, in different ways, to the theme of the religious structure of capitalism, the three texts of Georges Sorel, Erich Unger, and Gustav Landauer instead focus precisely on its overcoming. And in fact, the first two texts listed, Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* and Unger’s *Politics and Metaphysics*, are cited also in “Critique of Violence,” the only part of the project that was finally published.

The reference to Sorel’s book accompanies a note: “Capitalism and law. The heathen character of law” (GS VI: 102 / SW 1: 290). The page to which Benjamin refers belongs to a central chapter of the *Reflections*, the section on “force and violence” (IV) of the chapter “The Political General Strike”: here Sorel criticizes the “naturalization” of capitalist economy, by which an economic system resulting from a specific historical evolution, and as such contingent, is elevated to the rank of *natural law* and absolutized in a “science” which appears as “exact” as the sciences of physical nature. In the language of “Critique of Violence,” capitalism, and the bourgeois law that supports it, are thus “mythic,” that is, inscribed in a “demonic” necessity that belongs, as we have seen, to the sphere of fate and guilt. It is precisely this “mythic” connotation that makes capitalism and law “pagan” and excludes them from the ethico-moral order and from “true” politics. And yet, precisely in “Critique of Violence” (GS II/1:193-94/SW 1:245-46), Sorel’s book is cited to provide an instance of a politics that breaks the mythic cycle of violence and retribution: the “political general strike” theorized by Sorel is, for Benjamin, what can bring “naturalized” capitalism to an insurmountable stalemate; it is what can bring about the catastrophic rupture, the caesura, or, in the language of “Capitalism as Religion,” the *Umkehr*.

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30 Hamacher, “Guilt History,” 95.

31 Hamacher, “Guilt History,” 95; Löwy, “Capitalism as Religion,” 68.

32 Steiner, “Die Grenzen des Kapitalismus,” 46.

33 Steiner, “Kapitalismus als Religion,” 172.



In “Critique of Violence” Unger’s book is cited to criticize the character of “compromise” of liberal-democratic politics, but there is also a reference to a politics that takes into account “higher orders” and thus breaks away from the “mythic” circle of violence (GS II/1:191, 193/SW 1:244, 245). In “Capitalism as Religion” the reference to Unger is linked to the note “The overcoming of capitalism by migration” (GS VI:102/SW 1:290): the page of Unger’s book that Benjamin’s cites emphasizes how capitalism is able to adapt to and integrate any type of objection, conflict, and reaction; the only possibility to “overcome” it is, for Unger, that of exiting its range, its “sphere of action.”<sup>34</sup> The *Umkehr* takes up here spatial/territorial connotations and it is perhaps possible to glimpse some allusion to Zionism. Also the citation from Gustav Landauer’s *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* (*Call to Socialism*) focuses on the necessity of a transformation, which here is however understood in a spiritual sense. Like Sorel, Landauer was an anarcho-syndicalist, and like Sorel, he saw in contemporary capitalism a machine turning automatically to which he counterpoises the need for a transformation of the spirit, which will then lead to social and material transformations. As Steiner points out, a few pages after the one cited by Benjamin, in Landauer’s book we read this sentence “*Sozialismus ist Umkehr*.”<sup>35</sup> The *Umkehr*, the change of course that is also conversion, radical caesura, new beginning, is thus the lynchpin around which revolves Benjamin’s reflections on the “true” politics.

## VII

In “Critique of Violence,” this historical caesura (which is not named *Umkehr*) aims at founding “a new historical epoch” and revolves around the *de-position* (*Entsetzung*) of the mythic order of law through what Benjamin alternatively (and enigmatically) calls “pure violence,” “divine violence,” or “revolutionary violence,” the function of which is nonetheless that of breaking the mythic cycle of violence (GS II/1:202/SW 1:251-52). But we can hypothesize a further determination of the *Umkehr* as “true politics” by resorting to another fragment, perhaps contemporary to “Capitalism as Religion” (and therefore perhaps also belonging to the context of Benjamin’s *Politik*), the famous “Theological-Political Fragment” (GS II/1:203-4/SW 3:305-6).<sup>36</sup> The fragment is extremely complex and articulated, and rivers of ink have been consumed to interpret it, but what is interesting for the present argument is that in it Benjamin grounds “the task of world politics” on the construction of the “order of the profane” (*Ordnung des Profanen*) and rejects any political significance of theocracy (making this point was for Benjamin the cardinal merit of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*). Stating that theocracy has no political but only religious significance, Benjamin separates the sphere of politics from that of religion and provides perhaps a hint on how to interpret the way out from capitalism as *Umkehr* and “true politics”: the latter can only be a “profane politics,” a politics that breaks with the religious logic *tout court*, and with the capitalist logic of guilt/debt in particular. Moreover, the order of the profane, the fragment continues, “should be erected on the idea of happiness” and stands thus in complete opposition to the capitalist cult, the movement of which is instead directed to “the point where the universe has been taken over by [...] despair” [*Weltzustand der Verzweiflung*] (GS VI:101/SW 1:289).

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<sup>34</sup> Erich Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik*, ed. Manfred Voigts (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989 [1921]), 48.

<sup>35</sup> Gustav Landauer, *Aufruf zum Sozialismus. Ein Vortrag* (Berlin: Verlag des Sozialistischen Bundes, 1911), 150; cf. Steiner, “Kapitalismus als Religion,” 173.

<sup>36</sup> The editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* dated the fragment to 1920-1921, following Scholem’s conjecture (2012, 112) and against the initial idea of Adorno, who had given the fragment its title and, based on personal discussions with Benjamin, had dated it to 1938 (cf. Adorno 1990, 29). The editors of the *Selected Writing* have opted however to follow Adorno’s conjecture. The reference to Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* in the first paragraph could seem to validate the first hypothesis. In the short interpretation that follows I will modify the English translation.

This profane politics remains, however, in relation with theology (that is also why it is called “profane”)—indeed, as Andrew Benjamin argues, theology (here and elsewhere) should be understood as the cessation of religion, if religion, as in the case of capitalism, is inevitably marked by fate and guilt.<sup>37</sup> The philosophy of history that supports this idea of politics is a messianic philosophy. “The profane order of the profane” (*die profane Ordnung des Profanen*), Benjamin writes, is not a category of the messianic kingdom but remains in any case a “decisive category of its most unobtrusive approach”: “For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in happiness is its downfall destined to find it.” In other words, if the order of the profane cannot in itself establish a relation to the messianic, it nonetheless contributes to the coming of the messianic kingdom precisely in being secular and profane. The happiness upon which the order of the profane is erected is the “rhythm of messianic nature,” that is, happiness allows for the fulfillment of historical time, since the messianic kingdom “is not the goal [*Ziel*] but the terminus [*Ende*]” of history. The task of world politics is to strive for a total, messianic passing into the *saeculum*, and its method, Benjamin concludes, must be called nihilism (*GS* II/1:203-4/*SW* 3:305-6).

By way of conclusion, a recent interpretation can be brought together with this reading of the *Umkehr* as “profane politics”: Giorgio Agamben has placed “Capitalism as Religion” at the center of his text “In Praise of Profanation,” which with no explicit reference to the “Theological-Political Fragment” names “profanation” the “political task of the coming generation.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike secularization (the process described by Max Weber that led to the birth of capitalism, or that of Carl Schmitt’s political theology, which deduces sovereignty from divine omnipotence), profanation, Agamben writes, is not limited to displacing a religious concept into a secular one, leaving its forces untouched, but it rather “neutralizes” what it profanes and deactivates it, returning it thereby to what Agamben defines a new “use.”<sup>39</sup> We cannot further secularize the capitalist religion, since it is already the result of a secularization, it is already *the* secular religion. “True” politics as *Umkehr* and profane politics will have instead to deactivate precisely the sacredness of this secular religion in order to return the world to the common use.

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh:

Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 150 and *passim*. Whether for Benjamin all religions are marked by fate and guilt, as Andrew Benjamin argues, or only “heathen” religions belong to this “demonic stage,” is a question that exceeds the scope of this article.

<sup>38</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Forth (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 92. Benjamin’s fragment is used as a springboard for another text by Agamben, also titled “Capitalism as Religion,” in *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 66-78. Daniel Bensaïd, a keen and profound reader of Benjamin, also uses the phrase “profane politics” as *fil rouge* (and title) for his books *Éloge de la politique profane* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008) on the present political predicament.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” 77.