

# Law, Change and Revolution: A Theological Note on the Finality of Capitalist Resurgence.<sup>1</sup>

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If it is the case that 'every age adopts an image of itself—a certain horizon, however blurred and imprecise, which somehow unifies its whole experience', then we may enquire: in what does such a contemporary image consist? Perry Anderson suggests, with characteristic élan, the following: 'The radical internationalization of the forces of production—not to speak of circulation—that defines the spearhead forms of capital in the final years of the 20th century promises to render all national correctors. . . increasingly tenuous in the future. In that sense no society...will be immune to the unpredictable tides and tempests of an uneven development whose elements are acquiring a well-nigh meteorological velocity around the world.'<sup>2</sup> The intimation of apocalyptic in this image of tides and tempests hints at the possibility of epochal change; and indeed, it is a feeling that has grown into a conviction on the part of many theorists, as the world economy lurches towards the 21st century. 'Post-industrial', 'informational' or 'hyperreal': however the revolutionary force of capitalism is to be described at the close of this century, it is becoming increasingly clear that the sheer magnitude of these changes are installing, not only new patterns of economic production and exchange, but also, and more profoundly, new realms of human experience. The world is changing, a feeling uncannily and often disturbingly present to many, as they search to establish the lineaments of the human in this Promethean age. While charting the econometrics of these changes may lie beyond both the concern and competence of the theologian, it will be my contention that assessing their significance most assuredly does not.

In this article, I will present the phenomenon of capitalist resurgence from the point of view of a logic, or law, of global exchange. That is to say, in short, all can be exchanged, for all can be brought under the '*galvano-chemical* power' of Money, as Marx described it.<sup>3</sup> In consequence, I want ask: to what extent do the 'immanent Laws' of a

global capitalist economy threaten to *unravel* the logic of the incarnation, and stall its speculative construal of the relation between the finite and infinite? Bound, as I believe we are, to the Hegelian insight that God cannot be thought of as God without simultaneously considering the world and its historical situation, this is an area of questioning that seems to me vital. The area of questioning opened up by this suggestion is precisely that represented by the notion of *finality*: the finality of Christ and the finality of capitalist resurgence.

It might be objected that to draw these two notions into relation is simply to compound a conceptual misunderstanding. Talk about the finality of capitalism, indicates only that empirical success enjoyed by a certain mode of economic practice which, unlike any other practice this century, has not, in the words of Kenneth Minogue, proved to be 'unmistakably wrong'.<sup>4</sup> However, to talk of the finality of Christ, is to shift our discourse into an unpalatably ontological idiom, involving us in certain 'mythic' commitments proper only to faith. I will argue against this perception in an attempt to demonstrate a systematic link between the two. I want to suggest that, in the economy of faith, 'finality' marks a relation to, or *mimesis* of Jesus Christ, the fabric of which is being increasingly *unravelling* by the economy of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> In offering a 'Theological Note on the Finality of Capitalist Resurgence', I would enjoin reconsideration of the insight expressed by the French theologian Jacques Maritain, who, in the early and bitter years of this century, recognised that every crisis in the economic order compels us to study metaphysics. A Marxist critic has recently commented that Capitalism has revealed the historicity of Being and the consequent contingent and precarious nature of objectivity as no other economy before it.<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, are we not impelled to raise again the question of 'Life without why', as Heidegger called it: that is the possibility that all our acting in the world becomes an exchange deprived of any principle or *telos*? To raise this sort of question though is a risky business for it involves striking a note too often perceived as simply 'catastrophic'; and I would agree with Eberhard Jüngel that we must 'emphatically warn against the common contemporary arrogance with regard to the tradition.'<sup>7</sup> There is a peculiar absurdity attached to believing that we can simply jettison the tradition like some cast-off overcoat. This is not my business, and the metaphor I have chosen for my questioning is unravelling and not overcoming.

What then is it that we are to say about capitalism—about the finality of this particular economy? What is the meaning of this immense exercise of ingenuity and power? And are we, capitalism's subjects, as Marx suggested, 'like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to

control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.’?<sup>8</sup>

Marx’s post-1845 logic—against all the odds—is I believe, still important. Here, the dynamic of capitalism is represented in terms of a non-metaphysical concept of labour: that is to say, the fruit of Marx’s sustained effort to construct an anti-humanism which sought to know only people’s practice as against Man’s essence. As the often-quoted axiom of the Preface to *Capital* reads: ‘Here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests’.<sup>9</sup> The critical point here is not only that capitalism is to be treated as ‘a culturally all-embracing system of signification’—which of course it is—but that what it signifies cannot be *represented* as possessing any single origin or principle: whether this be construed as the quest for self-identity, the providence of God or whatever. All there is, for thought, is the multiple originary acts of individuals labouring to produce their means of subsistence. That Marx, at times, wavered in his adherence to this principle is clear, and no more so than in his notion of value.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, I want to urge that at the heart of Marx’s logic, lies the recognition that the economy of capitalism has arranged things, actions and words in such a way as to make its exchanges representationally rootless and groundless: that is *an-archic*. No more under the providence of God than they are products of the essence of Man himself.

It may be objected that this characterisation makes an illicit break with the Marxian commitment to the primacy of production, in order to introduce a reflection upon the nature of exchange under Capitalism. Here though, I want to follow Jean Baudrillard’s argument in suggesting that Marx’s insight into the representation of the capitalism as an-archic belongs more properly to an economy of exchange rather than to an order of production. Marx’s ‘mistake’ lies in his latent idealist anthropology of ‘needs’.<sup>11</sup> Thus, to take up Baudrillard’s argument: the use-value of a commodity provides us with no reference to any physiological or essential constant, but rather, under a capitalist mode of production, is already encoded as *utility* in the very act of production itself. Thus, for there to be exchange value it is already necessary that utility becomes the principle of reality for the object as product. But of course, as we may now recognise via Marx, this can provide us with no metaphysical *principle* for determining the *arche* or *telos* of the economy; for the economy itself consists only in a series of exchanges structured around the traumatic impossibility of essential value. And Money, under this account, we may suggest, is that ‘*abstract element in which is brought about the generalization of that which has no concept . . .*’<sup>12</sup>

To be exchanged and to be equivalent is a logic that leaves no relation or social level untouched. This is the power of capitalism; a power that now stands in radical relation to all previous societies by way of its liberation of production from all boundaries and barriers that societies erect against productive and economic autonomy. Thus, to speak of the finality of capitalist resurgence is to indicate that, at one level, the meaning of the millions of transactions that constitute the global economy today, is none other than the equivalence of exchange itself. But if this is the case then it is a finality that marks, very precisely, the epochal withering away of that relation to, or representation of, a nodal point of meaning: what I have referred to as the *arche* or *telos* of exchange, or, in the economy of faith, the 'finality' of Christ. And this, although in a very different context, is what I believe, Frederick Jameson is suggesting when he comments that: 'Pictures of decaying rails and abandoned factories we already had in the thirties; critiques of consumer society and its images we had in the fifties. But these are now old stuff. . . the real problem [is] the matter of representation itself, of the representation of this totality.'<sup>13</sup>

This compelling account of the dynamic of capitalism reveals its disruptive impact upon all those economies of experience, by which we have traditionally made claim, however precariously, upon the True and the Good. In other words, exchanges which involved the epiphany of our true and intended end. However, what it is critical to recognise, and this now directs us back towards a specifically theological discourse, is the fact that the coercive power proper to capitalism is not primarily that of physical might, but of the management of human desire: a levelling of subjectivity through the levelling of the modes in which the subject can re-present herself and her world. Therefore, under capitalism, as Marx rightly perceived, the subject can represent no point of pure positivity, heroically resisting the tides and tempests of equivalence, but is rather unravelled in the depthless 'degree-zero of contemporary culture', scattered to the winds as so many bits of reified technique, appetite and reflexivities of desire.

The provocative note struck here can doubtless be over-stressed; it seems that we would be right to bridle at Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the contemporary subject as nothing more than a 'Desiring Machine'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, we are all of us, increasingly bound up in that perpetual negotiation between ourselves as, for example, mothers, friends or tribesmen, and ourselves as ideal consumers. In the language of traditional political theory: standing, ever more stork-like, on the diminishing dry land of Civil Society, as it is washed away by the tides of the economy. In considering the economy of motherhood, for

example, we do not have to search far to discover how capitalism, as establishing a universal encoded utility, is disrupting a traditional patterning. One could cite surrogacy and donor insemination only to point up the fact that a woman opting for these choices becomes, almost inevitably, consumer before mother, and so shifts between two distinct orders of exchange. As Barbara Katz Rothman rightly recognises of the new technologies, whose context is ultimately capitalist exchange: 'They all empower, and they all enslave . . .'<sup>15</sup>

While theology may, in its own limited way, have begun to address the issues raised by the various discourses of post-modernity, it still appears balefully unprepared to recognise that these discourses have arisen out of a specific economy: that of world capitalism. In this situation, what we have to reckon with is a massive intervention into the fundamentally desirous nature of human beings as such. In conclusion, I want to draw together some earlier themes in this article—that is capitalism as an anarchic order of exchange operating increasingly at the level of desire—in order to point up three areas of questioning or 'unravelling' for any logic of incarnation, which, speculatively, involves a claim to the finality of Christ.

Firstly we should consider the fate of the theological concept of Personhood, bequeathed to history by that rare creativity of the Greek Fathers. Personhood, according to the Fathers, was no adjunct to Being but was rather its very constitution as the product of freedom. Thus, human beings were no longer to be understood as bound to the tragedy of existence, fated to live under an ontological necessity; but created in the image of a God whose very being was ascribed to His *free* will to exist. The Chalcedonian identification of the person of Christ with the hypostasis of the Son of the Trinity proclaimed therefore that Man's desire for personhood initiates no mythical or perennial quest, but is rather met in the person of Jesus Christ in history. In the economy of faith, it is baptism that symbolizes the intimate *metanoia* or overcoming of the tragedy of existence. For in baptismal 'New Life' the believer takes hold of and re-presents in his or her life any number of the patterns that constituted Jesus' life, death and resurrection.<sup>16</sup> This is the mystery of His continuing presence, and at its heart lies freedom; freedom envisaged as the ecstatic going forth of the Father to 'beget' the Son and 'bring forth' the Spirit.<sup>17</sup> However, if the success, the strength, indeed the 'finality' of capitalism is to be ascribed to its tautologous nature—that is to say ability to fold back into itself all desire through a rearrangement of needs<sup>18</sup>—how secure can we assume our theological concept of personhood to be? Where can we go in this world to discover that freedom that can only be ascribed to God?

Secondly we could consider the status of a Christian account of History. John Milbank declares: "The logic of Christianity involves the claim that the 'interruption' of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in the mission of Jesus, what we see is a human life so grounded in God that it in fact provides the very rationale of creation itself. The finality of Christ, which engages us in a necessary ontological idiom, betokens for faith, not an inviolable and ahistorical axis, but rather the 'shape' of a life marked by the receptivity of personhood. The finality of Christ therefore intimates the *arche* of creation, as within the trinitarian economy: the love of the Father who freely begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit; and also its *telos* as our participation within this divine life itself. Arising out of this understanding, we may posit a kind of dialectic for a theological reading of History: a dialectic distilled in the eschatologically charged epithet 'already but not yet', and given picturesque form in the revelation of St. John. However, in the perpetual present of capitalism—'Buy now and pay later', which is so aptly caught in Althusser's ubiquitous epithet 'always-already'—the *eschaton* would appear to be already here; indeed, under our very noses. The exchange, or *kenosis*, that characterises the relationship between God and the world, as the Creator's humility before his creation, is increasingly erased from experience before the levelling exchange of equivalence. In short, in the negotiations of experience it becomes ever more difficult to come across. This, I would suggest, initiates profound disturbances in our understanding of history; disturbances, it strikes me, that are charted in the 'venture, slowness and strain' of Martin Heidegger's mature reflections on what he called the *Kehre*, or 'the turning'. For when the constellation of things, actions and words mutates into a new pattern—a pattern we may name global capitalism and which we experience day by day—then our understanding finds itself unsettled. For the economy of faith, it is history as the eschatological tension between the *arche* of creation and *telos* of consummation that is released, slowly and imperceptibly, as each new exchange we undertake in the capitalist economy erases the claim upon the sacrificial, or kenotic, nature of action; action that appears ever less prophetic of the actions of Christ. As Rahner has noted, all genuine eschatological statements must of their nature be Christological because, 'Christ himself is the hermeneutical principle for all eschatological assertions'.<sup>20</sup> As the pattern of our representation of Christ is disrupted, so also is our ability to tell the story of God-with-us; the God who is coming to meet us.

My third and final consideration concerns God and leads me to

mention an essay which, in large part, has provided the inspiration for this paper. The essay is by the French philosopher/theologian Emmanuel Levinas and is entitled: *The Ego and the Totality*. In this brilliant paper he takes to task the great affirmation of 1 John: 4 that 'God is Love' in terms arising out of the nature of economic existence as the quantification of man under Money. His topic is not capitalism as such, but in the relations he draws between the economy of faith and the economy of material exchange he raises questions that I believe Christian theology must begin to address. Levinas charges that: 'The crisis of religion in contemporary spiritual life is due to the consciousness that society goes beyond the confines of love.'<sup>21</sup> 'All love . . . is love of a couple', which, in establishing a closed society, debar any third party from its internal amorous dialogue. It is precisely this dialogue that is represented in the ontological scheme of a religion of salvation' as the order of pardon: that exchange by which the ego is brought into a reconciled relationship with the transcendent God. However, Levinas argues, this ontology possesses only limited range: a range in which society remains intimate enough to measure its deeds solely and exhaustively in terms of *caritas* alone. With the progressive effacing of the possibility of any such society, the dialectic of the ego's constitution is to be accounted not in terms of love, but in terms of an economic relationship: for Levinas the presumption, or Law of original equality, whose interruptive justice is today to be discovered in Money. So it is then that Money, as the pure quantification of Man, opens out the possibility of a justice of redemption - that is an order of exchange which involves reparation other than a pardon grounded in the inequality of love; and so, according to Levinas, beyond its 'infernal circle'. The issue that remains for Christian theology is surely this: is it prepared to think the question of God with the severity and profundity of Levinas in a world where a global capitalist order presents the measure of all as Money, a '*generalization of that which has no concept*'. In other words, in terms of an ontology whose range and explicative power does not end at the borders of that intimate and dissolving civil society of love: the family, the Church, or whatever. And this, I contend, as Levinas well understands, is a *political* question; a question that concerns that place where our words, our products and our practices come together.

The questions that I have raised in this paper all point towards that broken terrain—as yet hardly ventured upon by Christian theologians—where the metaphysical nature of our economic existence bears directly upon the possibility of our representing the *arcana* of divine condescension: the presence of God in history. And here of course is the

rub for theology, and the reason I have tried to offer a theological note on the finality of capitalist resurgence. As the theologian Donald MacKinnon has commented: 'It is very hard to see how anything which we can continue to call Christianity can survive the withdrawal of the predicate *final* from the work of Christ.'<sup>22</sup> It has been my contention that such a withdrawal, if it is to occur—and, of course, it will never occur completely—will be effected in the economy of capitalism. The speculative construal of the finality of Christ collects together for faith an ordering of political life, of life together in the community which is the Church.

It is here that the questions that I have begun to raise begin to redound with increasing urgency. In a global capitalist economy, the Church must once more reapply itself to this notion, and all that it entails, if it is not to find itself erased by a world that has discovered a finality in an epochal turning the pattern of which we can as yet barely discern.

- 1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the conference: 'Religion and the Resurgence of Capitalism', Lancaster, July 1991.
- 2 'The Figures of Descent', *New Left Review*, Jan–Feb 1987, p. 77.
- 3 There are of course a variety of types of exchanges other than that of the market. Karl Polanyi, in his pioneering work *The Great Transformation* (Beacon, 1944), argues for a threefold typology: market, reciprocity and redistribution.
- 4 'Societies Collapse, Faiths Linger on', *Encounter*, March 1990, p. 3.
- 5 On 'finality' as 'a relation to the end', see Bernard Lonergan's helpful remarks in *A Third Collection* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p.24. The fabric metaphor comes, of course, from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), p.71, and so provides the context for my suggestion of 'unravelling'.
- 6 See Ernesto Laclau *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p.4.
- 7 *God As the Mystery of the World* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1983) p. 9.
- 8 *The Marx-Engels Reader* ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), p. 478.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.297.
- 10 G. A. Carnavale (ed.) *Marx and Modern Economic Analysis I* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991).
- 11 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign' in Jean Baudrillard: *Selected Writings* ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp.57–97.
- 12 Emmanuel Levinas *Collected Philosophical papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p.45.
- 13 *Late Marxism* (London: Verso, 1990), p.248.
- 14 *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984).
- 15 'The Meanings of Choice in Reproductive Technology' in *Test-Tube Women* ed. R. Arditti, R. Duelli Klein and S. Minden (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p.33.
- 16 For an illuminating and theologically sensitive account of this process see the remarks of Rowan Williams on mysticism and incarnation in his *Teresa of Avila* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), p.156.



- 17 See John D. Zizioulas *Being as Communion* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p.44.
- 18 The description of capitalism as 'tautologous' belongs to Jean-François Lyotard in *Economie Libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974).
- 19 In *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) p. 388.
- 20 'Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions' in *Theological Investigations IV* (London: DLT, 1966), p. 342.
- 21 Levinas *Collected Philosophical Papers* p.32.
- 22 *Explorations in Theology V* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p.79.

## Reviews

**THE WEIGHT OF GLORY —A Vision and Practice for Christian Faith: The Future of Liberal Theology, Essays for Peter Baelz edited by D.W. Hardy and P.H. Sedgwick, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991. Pp. 316. £19.95.**

These essays are offered to Peter Baelz, formerly Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford, and recently retired as Dean of Durham. Recognized as an exponent of 'liberal Christianity' in the Church of England he has been honoured by some twenty five friends and colleagues all invited by the editors to examine 'the liberal position' in contemporary Christian theology, to explore its limitations and possibilities and celebrate its existence.

Of course 'liberalism' can mean many different things: everything from Thatcherite market-dominated culture to rights-based ethics. In theology, at least since Newman's denunciations, liberalism has often been taken to mean that 'we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of faith and need no other guide', 'we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure', and so on (*Development*, pp. 357-8). Twenty five years ago *New Blackfriars* ran its own campaign against 'liberal individualism'. For Catholics, at least, liberal attitudes in theology are generally regarded as wrong, regrettable, shameful and inevitably heretical: choosing your own pizza topping rather than swallowing the universal catechism as it comes.

An entirely false dilemma, of course. When liberals assume that they are the ones who are by definition open-minded, unprejudiced and so forth, it maddens their critics because (as Alasdair MacIntyre likes to argue) open-mindedness is itself a prejudice and, anyway, tolerant