
Classifying Capital: A Roundtable

Introduction

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WHAT DOES the academic study of religion contribute to the study of capital and capitalism? What is the status of the field's scholarship in these areas, and how can we further develop this work? This roundtable considers these questions. Its genesis was an observation that scholars across subdisciplines and methodologies of religious studies have long identified capital as an item of concern. However, as processes of capital have shifted, scholarship in the study of religion has struggled to find coherent vocabulary for articulating how "capital" fits into the field as a whole. Is global capitalism a kind of stealth universalizing Protestantism? Is it a modern world religious tradition that deserves a place alongside Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and the other usual suspects of introductory surveys? Does capitalism produce religion, or does religion produce capitalism?

This collection of essays seeks new ways to classify and interpret capital within the study of religion. Recent scholarship has challenged at once the putative transparency of the secular and the exceptional neutrality of capitalism. This work tends to concentrate scholarly insight at two poles. On the one hand, scholars have considered markets as secular, as in *apart from religion*. Religion, in many of these iterations, is treated as an object existing in response to capitalism, or as a generating cause of certain forms of economic behavior.¹ On the other hand, scholars have uncovered the

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¹A rich conversation elaborates the secular as a discourse that is both constituted by and productive of its religious foil (see [Asad 2003](#); [Taylor 2007](#); [Fessenden 2007](#); [Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008](#); [Cady](#)

religious worlds embedded in the “economic,” thus revealing the *ostensible secular as really religious*. These projects, despite their overlapping themes of questioning nonpartisan foundations and of debunking the ascent of a rational subject, remain detached from one another. One consequence is that they tend to construct their respective categories—the secular and capital—as independently articulated projects of modernity.

Inquiries into capital have broken new ground in the academic study of religion. They have stretched the limits of a discipline that remains organized around “world religions” and their sympathetic study (Hulsether 2018a; Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 1996).² They have encouraged interdisciplinary practice and methodological innovation. But there is still significant room to build. These inquiries do not usually address the material, political, and social implications of capitalist economics and their entanglements with religious forms. Sustained analysis of raced economic violence and expropriation is often displaced by object lessons about how this or that element of modern capitalism is an appropriate object for the academic study of religion.

The study of religion requires more and better tools for critiquing religious and economic forms as they are organized, disorganized, and reorganized within relations of raced and gendered power. We call for an analysis of capital from the purview of religious studies that harnesses itself to a critique of political economy, including the political economy of our own scholarly production. We ask scholars to recall what Karl Marx proposed a century ago: that the critique of capital is a critique of religion; that the critique of religion is the basis for all critique; and—yes—that the point of this critical practice is to remake the world (Marx [1844] 1978).

CAPITAL AND RELIGION

Questions of capitalism and its relation to religion have refracted in the glow of the ideas and methods of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Scholars have addressed entanglements such as the labor of ritual (Smith 1987),

and Fessenden, 2013). Another set of conversations, which cross-cuts humanities fields, is increasingly intent on situating capitalism as a specific, contingent historical and anthropological formation that is not historically given or politically impartial (Rudnycky 2010; Coleman 2011; Graeber 2014; Brown 2015; Beckert and Rockman 2016; Harvey 2018). Jean and John Comaroff’s consideration of millennial capitalism and colonial reproductions of Christianity in South Africa are an exception to this rule (1991; 2001) as is Ruth Marshall’s address of the relation between Pentecostal Christianity and market forms (Marshall 2009).

²It is still common to divide the academic study of religion into smaller subfields of “tradition” and “geography.” Emergent inquiries into religion and capital not only buck this trend but also mounts a critique of this curio-cabinet organization of the discipline.

the materiality of belief (Vásquez 2012), the spirit of industrial religion (Callahan, Lofton, and Seales 2010), and the marketplace as religious archive (Lofton 2017). Others have considered the colonial, and thereby economic, legacies imbricated in the production of the category of religion (Asad 1993), the influence of colonial political economies on the production of forms of morality and salvation narratives (Taussig 1980; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), and the circulation of religious and economic ideas themselves (Meyer 2007). Analysts of religion have assessed the economy with keen interest in time, sociality, space, and the body (Guyer 2007; Peebles 2010), building from a dense sociological literature (Baudrillard 1998; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Bourdieu 1977; Caruthers and Kim 2011) and long form journalism (Lewis 2010; Sorkin 2009). The list goes on.

Where a direct consideration of capital in its relation to religion and the secular is concerned, the list thins. The concepts of capital and capitalism are deployed throughout the literature of critical religious studies, but most scholarship stops short of fully theorizing the relationship of categories of capital, the religious, and capitalist political economy. These relationships require further analytical attention and reckoning. In much scholarship on religion and capitalism, the first steps toward such an analysis are already in place. We are inviting scholarship to follow the line of critique further, toward undermining the categories of capital that arrange certain methods and praxes within the discipline.

Particularly absent from the academic study of religion is robust engagement with Marxian analyses. Whereas other humanities and social science subdisciplines have embraced Marxian analysis and invited confrontations with what such analysis enables and forecloses (Harvey 2005; Harvey 2010; Jameson 1991; Federici 1998; Derrida 1993; Ong 2006; Hall 1986), the academic study of religion retains a certain anxiety about reducing religion to “false consciousness” and thereby discounting the agency of our subjects (Bartel 2016; Mittermaier 2010; Mahmood 2004). Instead, our field has tended to approach capital through categories central to the field; we discover the “rituals” of consumer practice, “beliefs” in the market, and the “myths” of popular culture (Smith 1987; Vásquez 2012). Scholars of religion tend to route capital back through familiar terms, using capital as a keyword that can authenticate traditional analytical categories of our field (Bell 1992). This tendency has resulted in a muted attention to the uneven forms of labor that produce capital as a universalizing discourse. Scholars in other humanities and social science fields have observed these uneven forms of labor in financial investment and commodity exchange. They have also pointed to the way that scholarship itself elevates *capitalism* as its lingua franca (Hudson 2016; Tsing 2004; Ho 2009). The conceptual

production of capital, as category and as analytic, remains just beyond critical view.

Despite reservations about false consciousness as a frame for our work, a revelatory pattern nevertheless recurs in our analyses of capital and religion. Our scholarship is consumed with an urge to incite consciousness about capital's religious truths. Much of this scholarship was inspired by the pioneering work of Talal Asad, who in *Formations of the Secular* (2003) elaborated the secular as a category that is produced through mobile binary formations like sacred/profane and myth/rationality. Asad critiqued secularism not on the grounds that it "is European (and therefore alien to the non-West)" but that it is "closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-states—mutually suspicious and grossly unequal in power and prosperity, each possessing a collective personality that is differently mediated and therefore differently guaranteed and threatened" (Asad 2003, 7). The problem with the secular was its role in organizing geopolitical power and wealth.

Scholars built on this critique and focused primarily on excavating the hidden Protestant qualities of the secular. Consider, for example, a pattern in the last decade of work on religion and capitalism. Following the storied financial crash and recession in 2008, scholars in the humanities situated capitalism as a historical and anthropological formation that is neither historically given, nor politically impartial, nor—in the lexicon that swirled in the academic study of religion—secular. Published that same year, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's volume *Secularisms* offered a frame for the work. "The dominating discourse of universal secularism," the introduction explained, is "tied to the Protestant secularism of the market" (Pellegrini and Jakobsen 2008, 13). These scholars suggested that the expansion of global free markets also heralded the expansion of "presumptively Protestant" practices of subject formation. This work, along with key contributions by Saba Mahmood (2004) and Wendy Brown (2006), taught a generation to unveil the false universals of a dominant Protestant secularism and to search out the furtive Protestant ethic that lurked behind every secular object.

It is important to unmask the forms of alienation occluded and abstracted by capital. But this analysis is only a first step and, left on its own, can entrench its own logic of abstraction. At a formal level, this reveal reiterates an opposition between the "theoretician and the object of theoretical discourse" (Bell 1992, 25). Scholars are in a double-bind. The theoretician of secularity rejects the pretense of secular neutrality. She does what her training taught her to do: exhume the Western, white, Protestant underpinnings of what presented itself as universal (Anidjar 2014). To

make this move, she positions herself as an outsider to the relationship she has just revealed. She creates a distinction between herself and the thing she is revealing. She relies on an epistemological frame that deracinates and disembodies the scholar-critic. Herein lies the rub: this neutral stance, her self-disembodiment, depends on a raced, classed, and gendered production of the “Other” who, the theoretician determines, is so ensnared in the myth of universal secularism that she cannot realize her Protestant likeness.

We have become conscious, and conscious again, and conscious again of capital’s hidden religious elements. We can identify the Christian service ethic of Wal-Mart (Moreton 2009), the “corporate America that created Christian America” (Kruse 2015), the affecting “evangelical piety” of transnational security regimes (O’Neill 2015), the Christian valences of financial credit (Bartel 2016), the evangelical missionary scripts of Coca-Cola’s multiculturalism (Hulsether 2018b), and the Protestant asceticism of Goop (Logan 2017), to name just a few recent examples. Any project to uncover the hidden Christianity (whether of capitalism, enlightenment, modernity, secularism, liberalism, and so on) must assume a set of associations about what *Christian* means in these specific iterations. Christianity, much like any other of the religious traditions our discipline is concerned with, should be understood as the production of the “scholar’s study” (Smith 1982); a discursive tradition (Asad [1986] 2009), or a polemical concept (Marshall 2014). Scholars have begun to explore the imbrications of capital with traditions besides Christianity. In so doing, they expand the field’s overwhelming tendency to assume—in practice, if not in argument—that Christianity should receive prime of place in our analyses of capital. And so, it bears asking: What do we know when we know that Christianity underlies so many of the rituals, prescriptions, and aspirations of capitalist modernity (Vatter 2016; Goodchild 2009)? What can we understand when we trace Islam’s entanglement with neoliberalism in Indonesian factories (Rudnycky 2010)? How do we interpret the evidence that greater economic globalization is “making India more Hindu” (Nanda 2011)? What does the commodification of yoga bring to light in considering religious forms, fetishization, and commercial culture in the United States (Jain 2014)?

We have displaced the problems of capital onto religion generally and Christianity specifically. These concepts begin to serve less as beginnings of a critique and more like a shorthand—and scapegoat—for capitalist production. This is at the expense of a thoroughgoing engagement with the productive forces of capital: we launder capital through a third-party category of religion. To study capital is to study the motion and movement of

value. Capital is a shapeshifter. It is both process and product; mobile and in constant flux while also material and fixed (Marx [1867] 1976; Harvey 2018). Capital, value in motion, is also a social relation. It is social because it involves labor and relations of production. Capital's modes of production require methods of dispossession that are violently enforced through the very labor relations that permit its circulation. For Marx capital is generated in its first iteration through colonial processes of primitive accumulation—in other words, capital originates in plunder, “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (Marx [1867] 1976, 875). David Harvey furthers Marx's concept of primitive accumulation by conceptualizing capital's infinite growth as that of “accumulation through dispossession” (Harvey 1982). Intellectual production should be directed by an awareness and critique of the constraints that capital imposes on all forms of life in its inexhaustible hunger for dispossessed accumulation and extraction.³ This is especially true in the study of religion wherein a more robust engagement with Marxian lines of critique, for example, will recast interrogations of the ethical limits on value and personhood capital elaborates.

The productive forces of capital are embedded with imperialist, racializing, patriarchal forces of labored relations necessary for the continuous expansion of capitalist ethos and rationality. A critique of Christianity, to be sure, can be the beginning of a critique of capital. This analysis and critique is necessary for any decolonial, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal project. It cannot, however, be the end. Insofar as Christianity gives a shorthand for problems of capitalist political economy, it is notable that there is very little work that theorizes this relationship, especially when so much of the foundational scholarship in the study of religion is precisely about the relationship between religion and alienation of one kind or another (Marx [1844] 2007; Nietzsche [1867] 1997; Durkheim [1912] 2001; Weber 1905; Mauss 1925).

Again, it is helpful to integrate Marxian analyses into the study of religion, not because they are simple or should be taken on board without question but because of their clarity about what a critique of religion and capital does. For Marx, writing in the context of rapid industrialization in Europe, religion was a way of talking about the alienation of workers from their labor and thus from the productive power that, for Marx, was what made them human. For Cedric Robinson, who maps the collision of Marxian and Black radical tradition, a critique of religion helps to identify racial antagonisms at the heart of a capitalism forged in the slave trade and

³Kathryn Lofton (2017) has elaborated capitalism's religiosity in terms of its organizational power over social life. Lofton does so in conversation with Durkheim.

as way of identifying the metaphysical, mythic resources that fuel rebellion (Robinson 2000 [1983]). For Silvia Federici (1998), a Marxian-feminist analytical frame recasts timelines of capitalist origins and Christian interventions in an excavation of the gendered class relations embedded in, and necessary for, capitalist divisions of labor. For Frantz Fanon, Black Caribbean psychiatrist and anti-colonial revolutionary, the critique of religion is a double-refusal of both the production of mythical African pasts and the lure of recuperative narratives of progress (Fanon [1963] 2004). Rooted in the afterlife of slavery, a critique of religion as alienation in and from history throws the critic back on her own irreparable losses and the impossibility of repair.

Contemporary scholars of religion—with our allergy to making normative claims (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013), our calls to take seriously our subjects' intentions (Prichard 2010), and the generalized pressure to reiterate our humanistic relevance in the contemporary university (Renick et al. 2008)—have been more modest. We should reconsider our approaches. Insofar as our analysis is caught up in uncovering where Christianity or other “religious forms” hide, we risk under-thinking, or ignoring, questions about what capital does, what value it extracts, and what worlds it makes.

CAPITAL AND THE ACADEMY

If you make any part of your life in the academy, you know the worlds capital makes and their movements and counter-movements in the questions of your professional life. What courses will help you “stay relevant” and appeal to potential students? Will you advertise courses by appealing to “world religions” even though you know that this is a colonizing discourse? Should you try again on the job market after years on the lecturer grind and, honestly, what was the thing that made you stay? How many adjuncts can you hire and graduate students can you admit, knowing they are earning poverty wages, without losing sleep at night? Should you, as a graduate student, support unionization on your campus? Will your tenure be jeopardized if you publicly support labor justice campaigns at your university? How much unpaid intellectual and administrative labor are you assuming your more precarious colleagues—especially women and people of color—will perform on your behalf while they receive little to no acknowledgement, material compensation, or job security?

Finally, what does it mean when “capital” is the lingua franca of numerous humanities disciplines, but attention to its racialized and gendered economic stratifications and labor expropriation has been largely out of view? More than just a performative contradiction, the propensity

to reveal makes a critical analysis of political economy secondary to a project of awakening to capital as a “religious” object. It postpones confrontation with the material conditions of capitalist political economy and social relations, including and especially as they influence our own scholarly production. Aisha Beliso-de Jesús recently called the field to take up “analytic and technical approaches that challenge us towards an activist-oriented decolonial stance. This stance draws on the relationality, conflict, tension, power, and politics of studying racialized religious and spiritual subjects with an unapologetically transformative agenda” (Beliso-de Jesus 2018, 312). We put capital in the crosshairs of this agenda.

Scholarship today runs up against the problem that the end of capitalism is as difficult to imagine as the idea that capitalism has no end (Santos 2015).⁴ The constraint on imagination is exactly what an engagement with capital and its religious, political, and social production has the potential to interrupt. A materialist analysis for the twenty-first century that, by definition, prioritizes the analysis of specific, historical power relations will prepare us to better understand the terrains of ideological struggle in which we are located. In turn, we will better grasp the stakes of our choices as thinking, teaching, producing, consuming actors within these ever-shifting terrains (Hall 1986).

The academic study of religion participates in, and builds, the worlds of capital. Movements and counter-movements of capital produced the category of “religion” and its institutional study as a state project, as a racializing project, and as a colonial enterprise (Beliso-de Jesus 2018; Hulsether 2018a; Masuzawa 2005; Joy 2001; Asad 2003). The formal academy is now comprised primarily of people in positions of extreme precarity and labor contingency. A disproportionate number of these intellectuals and teachers are women, people of color, and queer people. This is a situation created and recreated, every day, by accumulating ways that fail to imagine or act outside the imperatives of capital. There are always pockets,

⁴It is important to note the political work of utopia, especially at and from the margins of hegemonic power, including in the field of religious studies, especially when thinking about the relationship between secularism and capitalism. Boaventura De Sousa Santos offers a succinct provocation to move scholarly discussion towards an “intellectual utopia,” which is one that challenges the “common sense” of a Eurocentric and Enlightenment-based form of rationality and, therefore, exclusion. De Sousa Santos laments, “The possibility of alternatives is discredited precisely for being utopian, idealistic, and unrealistic. Under neoliberalism, the criterion is the market. The total market becomes the perfect institution” (Santos 2007, 236). For Santos, an “intellectual utopia” simply allows for “a radical critique of current day reality and the aspiration for a better society” (Santos 2007, 236). For Santos, it is below human dignity, even below human intelligence, to “accept that there is no alternative to a world in which the five hundred richest individuals take in as much income as the poorest forty countries” (Santos 2015, 23). Utopia, in these renderings, provides the political imagination that allows humanity to think otherwise about its future.

in our universities and in our cities, that struggle to bring other worlds into being. These movements are intellectual, social, and political. Some are legible to the academy, and some are not. There are entrenched conflicts in their traditions of thought and action. But each suggests that, in the words of Stuart Hall, “no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located” (Hall 1986; Marx [1844] 1978). When our scholarship recognizes and reckons with this determinacy, we acknowledge critique as a process without closure or guarantees. This critique unfolds as a horizon where scholars continue to refine our explanations, and our politics, and discover new insights within historically specific realities. Without a consideration of the reproduction of capital, both as a concept and as a material process, the labor relations that sustain it, and the rationality that undergirds it, our analysis will be inadequate before it can even begin.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The interventions in this Roundtable, organized around keywords, are meant to be read as resources for an ongoing conversation in the interdisciplinary humanities generally and Religious Studies in particular. Taken as individual entities, the essays propose avenues into long-standing, but often fragmented, conversations within the academic study of religion. Taken as a collective, they generate a body of concepts from which scholars might anchor future critiques.

The series begins with contributions from Rosemary Corbett and Rachel Havrelock, whose analyses model how scholarship on religion can advance sharper analyses of recognition within neoliberal formations of power. Corbett considers the uses of “freedom” in the free-market discourse of Imam Abdul Raif, who has been central to the public production of a specifically American Islam that articulates free markets as the basis for the free expression of religion. Havrelock then elaborates the term “energy” by analyzing Upton Sinclair’s novel *Oil*, the novel on which the Hollywood blockbuster *There Will Be Blood* was based. Havrelock reads the novel and the film in light of the launch of the Gulf Wars to elaborate the relationship between the imperial search for fossil minerals and the discursive production of religious extremism.

These questions of recognition and control are bound up in the generation of desire and affective attachment among various publics, a theme to which the next three essays turn. Through their essays on modern formations of attachment, Gauri Viswanathan and Matthew King engage a conversation that particularly has flourished in critical feminist and queer

theory. King elaborates Buddhist approaches to “desire” by rethinking tantric capitalism and Buddhist economics. Viswanathan takes up the category of “value” in relation to H. G. Wells’ novel *Tono Bungay* to theorize twentieth-century constructions of value—specifically the pretense that capital creates something out of nothing—and their alienating effects. Then, in a piece that approaches contemporary politics through a diagnosis of aesthetics, Tracy Fessenden considers the status of Protestant asceticism in light of Donald Trump’s performances of minstrel “bling.” In content as much as in argumentative form, these essays exhibit capital as generator of attraction and repulsion.

The final two essays by Elayne Oliphant and Michael Ralph turn the analysis to transnational regimes of credit and debt, qualification and disqualification, in modern capitalism (Lazzarato 2015; Moten and Harney 2013; Chakravarty and da Silva 2013). Ralph maneuvers broadly through medieval church statutes, slave codes, and liberal political theory to build a theory of “forensics” as a way to account for why capital leaves some of its subjects to live—and others to die. Oliphant then assesses the “debts” capitalism owes to the populations it dispossesses, grounding her intervention in local projects to dream and to enact alternative forms of solidarity within capital’s death-dealing surrounds. To close, Kathryn Lofton assesses the collection and offers prompts for continued critical endeavors in the interstices of religion and capitalism.

This is only one description of how these essays speak to one another. We expect that readers will find new maps of their connections, trace their resonances and conflicts, and discover how they intervene on and critique one another. We invite readers to build, revise, and contest what remains undone or underthought in the collection. The aim is neither uniformity nor finality. We hope, instead, to make space for collaborative thought and inter-disciplinary imagination, which is materially informed and critically responsive to the conditions of its production.

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