

The Return of the Living Dead: René Girard and Philip Rieff on Order-in-Divine Decline¹

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Since the French Revolution, writers Left and Right have famously lamented the nihilism of bourgeois society. Take the *Communist Manifesto* for example:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.¹

Thus Karl Marx channels Joseph de Maistre. Tellingly, though, the sentiment of this famous passage is conflicted. Marx's scandal at bourgeois society suggests that it may be more revolutionary than its socialist rivals, and signals fear of its revolutionary drive. The spectre of communism wants to rob the "bourgeois epoch" of its revolutionary genie and to stuff it back into the bottle at the same time. In any case, Marx reveals more than he realizes here. Even when he misses the point he sometimes has an uncanny ability to put his finger on it. What is revolutionary about the epoch is that it makes revolution itself its driving principle. There has always been but one revolution in modernity, and that (pace

¹ A version of the first ten pages of this paper was also presented at a conference on Debt hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, April 29-May 1, 2010.

Marx) is the bourgeois one. And it has mightily accelerated since Marx's time. The substance of its principle is equality and its form is the market—things Marx elsewhere protests as not revolutionary enough. What his ambivalence perfectly crystallizes, though, is the Jekyll-and-Hyde character of modernity, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, radicalizing and reactionary at the same time. Evidently unlike any other social order, modernity is split into warring personalities, enemy brothers as inseparable as they are incompatible.

Other critics, too, moderate or radical, from Tocqueville and Kierkegaard to Nietzsche and Heidegger, have criticized nihilism or cognates such as leveling, alienation, or decadence. With Marx, they variously ascribe these to equality, democracy, capitalism, liberalism, or technology, but their reaction unites them despite their differences. The nihilist lament is also a fixture of conservative and communitarian social criticism of the loss of capacity for greatness or for awe and wonder, the desecration of tradition, the destruction of community, or the ethos of hedonism. What its critics ignore, though, is just how efficacious nihilism is in the social mechanisms of liberty, how indispensable to the moral economy of equality. They fail to describe its functionality within the democratic universe, as a cultural means of mediating the exigencies of a world transformed by equality. Or at least seeming to mediate, since all it may really do is temporize and defer insoluble dilemmas of modern life. Even so, the culture of nihilism is, alas, very far from being stale, flat, and unprofitable.

To describe the functionality of nihilism, its debt to debt, and how it intimates the mortal limits of democracy, is the aim of this paper. Democracy generates a teleology of nihilism, but one it cannot do without, even if in the end it is fatal. Democracy strives to

replace what once appeared as a “natural” and “divinely legislated” order with a “cultural” or “aesthetic” one in which individuals are free to invent themselves, a virtual reality predicated on individual will or imagination. Debt affords critical leverage in this. If not the cause of it, the exponential expansion of debt (especially since WWII) is joined at the hip to a wholesale revolution in democratic culture driven by the market at least since the Jazz Age. The spiritual economy of democracy seems unable to sustain itself without a vast amplification of credit, personal and national. This affords the possibility of the privatized utopias of consumerism, and sustains the national myths of world-historical mission, equally indispensable to the self-image of democratic man. Sooner or later, of course, the bill comes due. In the meantime, though, this economy operates by a dual action projecting the future—partly by conjuring up an imagined tomorrow, and partly by fending it off. In a word, it keeps the future open and on-going, in ostensibly perpetual postponement. Within this context, debt is not a peripheral liability of economy but its foundation, the “material” equivalent of a future that must never arrive nor ever disappear. Ostensibly it affords an instrument by which reality itself may be kept at bay, a social imaginary insulating itself from collision with the material world not by sacrifice but by its deferral.

This is not simply bad policy; it is anthropological necessity. All social orders have cultural means for dealing with conflicts, containing the violence of rivalries that might destroy society were it permitted to get out of hand. Democracy, though, inhabits a peculiar dilemma. It abolishes traditional means of damping down social conflict by means of hierarchy or rank order, upheld by religion and tradition. Simultaneously, it increases the potential of conflict by forcing citizens into greater psychological

proximity, removing the cultural distances between them. It cranks up the agonistic anxieties among those who are, in each other's eyes, on the same moral plane. Equality is not just a right; it is a burden, as individuals must demonstrate to themselves and their contemporaries that they are not inferior but just as good as anyone else or even better. "No one is better than me," declares the ambiguous ethic of equality. The definingly democratic passion is humiliation, real or imagined, actual or feared. Its proper emotion is a sense of nothingness experienced in self-comparison with others.² That is, it is an existential inferiority complex, and no one should underestimate its motivating power. Apparently the only way to hold one's own, psychically speaking, is by proving—as much to oneself as to others—that one is "free," the author of one's destiny. To show oneself as "equal" or better, one must also show that one is autonomous, independent, or self-determined, if not self-created. In this context, democracy's addiction to debt, personal and sovereign, may be understood as a strategy of deferral that underwrites myths of freedom of popular culture. Dangerous as this might be for the long-term health of the economy or polity, this structure of postponement can scarcely be avoided as a condition of democracy, at least one that has nearly doubled its population to 300 million and vastly expanded civil rights in the past sixty years or so. The subject of this essay is the "apocalyptic" teleology this entails.

Drawing on René Girard, Philip Rieff, Daniel Bell, Karl Polanyi and others, I develop the first part of what is properly a two-part argument. The argument as a whole consists in two pairs of propositions forming an "apocalyptic" progression. Space prevents me from doing justice to the second (and equally indispensable) part of the whole, which I can only touch upon here and again at the end, as a likely continuation.

In the first place, capitalism is democracy; markets are democracy in motion, an emancipatory contagion of equality; money is the tangible expression of equality, the object and symbol of democratic desire. The egalitarianism of money is by no means inconsistent with scandalous inequalities of wealth; to the contrary, equality generates its own inequalities, just as it generates the desire for inequality. The money-driven economy affords a social mechanism by which the passions unleashed by equality, negative passions usually destructive of society such as envy or resentment, can be turned into sources of prosperity.³

In the second place, capitalist markets are revolutionary, but their revolutionary nihilism makes them all the more effective both as contagions of democratic desire and as means by which its social conflicts are mediated and temporized. Capitalism does not just spread the gospel of equality; it also makes it socially workable, within limits. But only by means of a cultural revolution that transforms all traditional moral understandings, especially in the region of personal life and the relation of the public and the private. However effective this may be in servicing the exigencies of the democratic psyche, though, it threatens the cohesiveness of society. Thus the paradoxical productivity of capitalism: the more creative it is of democratic wealth and culture, the more it disintegrates social order. Capitalism serves to postpone antagonisms within “civil society,” the envies and jealousies of democratic men and women, but only by intensifying antagonism between itself and social order as a whole. It mediates conflicts on the inter-personal level, but only by aggravating the collision between “society” itself and its “sacred” order.

This brings me to the latter half of the argument, which (again) I can only touch

on here and at the end of this essay. It can be briefly sketched, though.

In the third place, then, as capitalism cannot perform its function of discharging or temporizing the antagonisms of democracy without attacking the communal order of society, it provokes a collision between its two primal drives, the sacred and the profane. I use a broadly Durkheimian notion of social order as founded in the difference of the sacred and the profane, respectively the ritual and symbolic expressions of communal identity and the everyday dealings with things that sustain life.⁴ Social order is not to be confused with “politics” and “economics,” which always presuppose it. Order is not forged from politics and economics; rather, the latter emerge from social order, even if they attack it. It is the true “unconscious” of society. Nor is modernity “secularization,” the progressive reduction or elimination of religion by the supposedly “disenchanted” worlds of politics and economics. As if returning to primeval Durkheimian origins, it is an antagonism of the sacred and the profane, of the modern itself and the archaic. Traditionally, both are equally necessary, but that is not to say they are equal in rank. In the modern world, though, the sacred and the profane become rivals, enemy brothers. The secularizing impulses of modernity—more precisely, of the market, as the principal force of profanization—only stiffen the sacred resistance of social order. (And of individual personality too, for this constitutive distinction is the basis of character also, a structure of the psyche.) To the secularizing mentality, the reaction of the sacred must seem like an inexplicable attack of Hitchcockian birds from out of the blue. It cannot understand why the sacred keeps reappearing irrepressibly to scourge it, even growing in strength as the profane thinks to ply its way to “emancipation.”

In the fourth place, finally, modernity does not diminish the power of the sacred

but only debases it. Sacred order (socially and individually) reflexively defends itself against the depredations of the market, even if that degrades the sacred at the same time. In debased form, sacred order can only return as a cult of violence, an idolatry of the once hidden source of the sacred itself, in as much as the sacred is originally founded in sacrifice. In modern context, the return of the sacred—like the decomposing resurrection of the living dead in the movies—cannot save social order but only hasten its destruction. It no longer enjoys the innocence of its operations in archaic religion, an ignorance that made it effective. The emancipatory freedom of the market both provokes and corrupts the sacred reflex, which serves to accelerate rather than deter communal disintegration. In this scenario, reality is experienced traumatically, as the apocalyptic revenge of the sacred in the collapse of the illusions of popular culture. This is not just a cinematic conceit, though. The sacred immune system of the body politic becomes a threat to that body itself. A critical aspect of this debasement is the politicization of the culture-wars. Modern politics is incapable of resolving cultural divisions, yet it cannot resist the temptation to think that it can. And so those who believe they are the ones to save order are the ones who consummate its destruction.

The crux of this argument runs on two axes, that of Rene Girard and that of Philip Rieff. The final works of Rieff (best known for his classic books on Freud and the “therapeutic culture” in the Fifties and Sixties⁵) imply that modernity is a fraternal rivalry of two orders, a world divided against itself. Rieff implies this without actually stating it, though, because he is so caught up in the culture-wars himself that he cannot entirely see the kinship its rivals intimate, constitutive of the modern world.⁶ He presents as two distinct cultural types what is in fact two-cultures-in-one, a single culture whose unity is

its schizophrenia. Effectually, though, this is what he reveals. Rieff's later thought, published just before and after his death in 2006, is more polemical than theoretical. But it does offer a theory of social order in terms of sacred order, a Durkheimian notion paradoxically leavened with Judaic (and Christian) elements, which he contrasts with a culture of "transgression" that is "modern" in the narrow sense of the term. His thought (as I read it) is an intuitive reflection on the implicit fraternity of these enemies, their tacit bond in their antagonism. An "apocalyptic" thinker (not his term), Rieff is a thinker of order-in-decline, order in process of decomposition. Evidently he offers no solace that this is reversible.

If Rieff expresses the vertical axis of social order, Girard lays out its horizontal, the human level of interaction, or "mimetism." According to Girard, human desire is "mimetic," acquired by reciprocal imitation of human beings. Human beings not only acquire objects of desire from each other, but the distinctively human behavior of desiring itself is picked up by contagious reciprocity. Paradoxically, he argues, the mimetic nature of desire entails not just conformity or social comity but rivalry and violence, as individuals cannot but find themselves in competition for the same things. These conflicts are especially intense when the object of contention is human "being" itself, personality or individuality or freedom, some image of an authentic existence of a "self" of one's own, wrested away from others, as it were. In a universe predicated on equality, the "self" so devoutly desired is always, on closer analysis, the self *of someone else*. One's neighbor secretly supplies one's model, who by the same token is doomed to become a rival.

Girard's theory of mimetic desire is, I suggest, really a theory of democratic

desire, in effect a theory of democracy itself, as an anthropological phenomenon. Equality transparently reveals the nature of desire as mimetic. Nowhere is this so clear as where it is so insistently denied, in consumer culture where everyone is afforded the illusion that he is author of his desire. Conversely, desire is the natural mode of existence of equality, a relation of individuals who measure the being they crave in terms of each other. Democracy is not just a political regime but a modality of human relations in which individuals relate to each other psychically as “equals,” same in their difference and different in their sameness. Anthropologically speaking, democracy is desire itself, stripped of all traditional limits. As Pierre Manent argued in his book on Tocqueville, equality generates almost a new species of human being, “democratic man,” who thinks and feels the same emotions in a radically different way than “aristocratic man.”⁷ This is where the real dynamic of modern life is to be sought. It exists most profoundly on social, cultural, and psychological levels (which “anthropology” as I use that term here tries to grasp in their identity), at a depth that simply escapes the merely political or economic, which abstract from the total social fact.⁸

My argument weaves together Girard and Rieff. Girard hypothesizes a burgeoning “mimetic crisis” in the modern world, as equality breaks down boundaries and barriers erected to differentiate individuals, separate their desires, and keep them at some salutary distance so as to dampen their propensity for violent conflict. Rieff theorizes culture as *culture-war*, sprouting from the implacable rivalry of the holy and the hedonistic under modern conditions. The “mimetic crisis” which unfolds in the profane dimension of the market feeds a larger collision between the profane and the sacred, as the catallaxy of the market encroaches on social order. The apocalyptic crisis of the

modern world is not just the mimetic rivalries intensified by the emancipation of desire, as Girard tends to say, but the rivalry of the sacred and the profane, as these assume political form.

Daniel Bell and Karl Polanyi, the social critic and the economic historian, afford us important clues to the apocalyptic teleology I want to describe. Bell's notion of "the cultural contradictions of capitalism" in his 1976 classic of social criticism by that name suggests a moral schizophrenia of advanced liberal democracy.⁹ Such schizophrenia is not just a recent phenomenon, though; it divides the modern world from the beginning, into Left and Right, economics and politics, and the other divisions that constitute the human sciences, especially sociology and psychology. Bell's own criticism, partly sociological and partly moral, reflects the split personalities of modernity. Polanyi seeks to diagnose the political cataclysms in European history in the first half of the twentieth century through the antagonism that emerged between laissez faire capitalism in the century preceding WWI and social order.¹⁰ Like the cultural schizophrenia of democracy described by Bell, Polanyi describes an insoluble political and economic crisis—a conflict between the political and the economic—brought on by the catallaxy of the free market and society's inevitable, but aggravating, defensive reaction. His diagnosis of past events, though, might in some way serve as a prognosis of our condition. With him I will conclude.

In making this argument I am neither defending nihilism nor attacking democracy, just describing the structure and teleology of the modern equation of equality and liberty from an anthropological point of view. A major aim, though, is to suggest that Left and Right, the constitutive ideologies of democracy, are each fatally incoherent,

each in their own way, and that as ideologies they are designed to disguise and disown their disastrous contradictions. Contrary to the Left, for example, capitalism or the “free market” as we know it is not (for all its inequalities) the antithesis of democracy but its most potent form (on the level of culture). It is a veritable contagion of democratic desire, of appetites shaped by the anxieties of equality. The more its scandalous disparities grow, the greater the force of its democratic contagion and egalitarian appetite. As it awakens these desires, it also affords them an avenue by which to discharge themselves, to “satisfy” themselves after a fashion, in the production and possession of wealth, in the quest for status, in the satisfactions of self-image. This forestalls potential conflicts that might otherwise spin out of control, as long at least as it is prosperous. It is not possible to scale back capitalism or abrogate the market without undermining democracy. Contrary to the Right, though, capitalism and markets are a radical force of moral and cultural revolution. In fact they are the principal engine of the wholesale transformation in social and personal mores across the last century, especially in the relations between the sexes and within the sexes—the sexual revolution supposedly brought about by the counter-culture of the Sixties, the flashpoint of the “culture-wars.” With its double embrace of the free market and moral traditionalism, American conservatism is a Trojan horse in which cultural revolution is gift-wrapped in moral nostalgia—as if “free market principles” were like returning to the nineteen-fifties, the halcyon childhood of today’s market, before we actually had a Fed chairman devoted to Ayn Rand. Or perhaps we should describe it as the wolf disguised as grandmother in the fairy tale. Just as the ideology of the Left is designed to disown the effects of democracy by blaming them on capitalist economics, the ideology of the Right is designed to disown

the moral and cultural effects of capitalism, by blaming them on the political democracy of the Left. A final question, then, is how the internal division of democratic modernity into Left and Right in the first place and the consequent blind spot at the center of the vision of each facilitates the operation of the whole, though only within mortal limits.

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¹ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1978). 476

² The philosophy of Sartre probes this democratic sensibility, the experience of nothingness of the self in the face of the other.

³ Eric Gans, like other neo-conservative writers, links capitalism, markets, and democracy, and also recognizes the “deferential” role it plays. My view here, though, is not finally a neo-conservative one. Gans’ deeply perceptive and original view nevertheless does not do justice to the apocalyptic implications of democracy thus understood. Eric Lawrence Gans, *Signs of Paradox : Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁴ Emile Durkheim and Karen E. Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁵ Philip Rieff, *Freud, the Mind of the Moralist*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), ———, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic : Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th anniversary ed. (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2006). These books were originally published 1959 and 1966, respectively.

⁶ See especially Philip Rieff and Kenneth S. Piver, *My Life among the Deathworks : Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority, Sacred Order/Social Order* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), Philip Rieff, *Charisma : The Gift of Grace, and How It Has Been Taken Away from Us*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).

⁷ Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

⁸ As Marcel Mauss calls the structure of reciprocity that constitutes a social order.

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift; Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*

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⁹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

¹⁰ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation : The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd Beacon Paperback ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001).