The language of corporate culture

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Religion and corporate culture

At first glance it might seem that of all the public spheres the discourse of corporate culture is the most inimical to religious interpretation and reading. For there is, in this sphere, the paradox of public and private most openly juxtaposed and articulated. Quite clearly, the corporate sphere is a public one – the very notion of the marketplace functions as symbol of the public sphere. Yet it is a public sphere which operates with a rhetoric of privacy, a rhetoric which resists the intrusion of other public discourses and interventions. In its classic stance, one which is only modified under pressure, the corporation defines itself as a ‘private public’ – it is accountable to none but its shareholders and resists and resents ‘outside’ control or intervention. Classically, it demands that Government stay out of its way, or at best, smooths its way to operate without constraint. It resists, too, and above all, any ‘intrusion’ of religious discourse as public discourse into its world. Religion is tolerated within the corporate only in the most privatised of forms.

And yet, in analysing the discourse of corporate culture, my argument is that this language is, in two different modes, very similar to religious language. In the first mode, it is religious in that it operates religiously even if the language itself is not religious. In the second mode, it co-opts religious language to express its own intent and programme. The two modes are, of course, not unrelated.

Corporate discourse as alternative religion

The Market

David Loy has recently argued that global capitalism and its accompanying ideology of the market has become, effectively, the first truly world religion. Loy’s account of the ‘religious’ dimension of global capitalism is convincing and provocative. He argues that it now competes with other religions in its soteriology – it offers salvation to those who follow its demands; its ritual – it has its own temples of worship (the shopping malls and sports arenas); its religious hierarchy of priests (the international financiers) and prophets (the economists), who are, moreover, usually false ones! Furthermore it demands sacrifices -- even human sacrifices -- as the cost of salvation (the poor and marginalised), and it has become for many the basis of determining what is the right action (the good), of determining what is to be desired (the beautiful), and of determining what is right or wrong (the true). "The market has decided", "the market has called for it", "the market compelled us to do it".

Ulrich Düchrow has a similar analysis, but he draws from Luther’s insight into the First Commandment as a means of fully understanding this religious dimension of the market. It is not just about ritual and salvation, it is about God and the gods, or God and the idols. He cites Luther:

What is it to have a god? What is God? Answer: a god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else that to trust and believe in him with our whole heart….For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God. (Luther’s Large Catechism in Düchrow 1995:218)
For many today, around the world, it is quite clear that the Market (or Mammon) is the god they serve.

Of course, this religious reading of capitalism has deep roots. Its foremost theorist, Adam Smith, spoke of the market’s providential ordering of human good in terms analogous to Christian understandings of the ubiquitous working of the Spirit ("the invisible hand"). Max Weber demonstrated the affinities of "the Protestant ethic" with the "Spirit of capitalism", and also argued that capitalism, unlike other modes of economic organisation, was not directly driven by individuals, it is ‘slavery without the slaveowners’, ‘impersonal’ and beyond the realm of ethical regulation. As such, it demands "service", or latreia (worship). I cite Düchrow again:

So when, according to Weber, the capitalist market economy defines as its nodal point "service" of an impersonal, objective purpose, it makes in its own context a statement about what in pre-modern cultures was called God (Düchrow 1995: 124).

Of course, there is another whose analysis of the religious dimension of the market has these days dropped somewhat out of fashion. I refer, of course, to Marx’s analysis of the nature of the commodity, the fundamental category in his analysis of capitalism, as a "fetish". What is a fetish? A fetish is an inanimate object which is invested with human or even divine powers. Commodities, in capitalism, become an enchanted world (Hinkelammert 1986: 5) of interaction and social relations between objects, things. Hinkelammert writes: "We behold a immense panorama of interaction among commodities. They struggle among themselves, makes alliances, dance, and fight, with one winning and the other losing. All the kinds of relationships that can exist among human beings arise also among commodities" (1986: 5).

But this analysis has a tragic side. If inanimate things take on life and interact among each other as animate, they only do so, according to Marx, as a consequence of the opposite process, where human beings are reduced to things, to commodities, and become, in fact, subordinate to and dependent upon the fetishised commodity to live. This process of treating human being as things, of reducing human interactions and social relations to the level of the commodities, is the consequence of "abstract labour", and produces what a later Marxist thinker, Lukacs, would call, reification.

If these analyses are correct, and I think that they are, then it possible (and necessary) to understand the power of market ideology and the discourse of the market which is attached to it. As religious discourse, as religious praxis, it is a power which seems incontrovertible and immutable. Its logic is compulsive and coercive (it exerts ‘discipline’, it is ‘market driven’), ubiquitous and omniscient (‘global markets’, ‘nothing outside the market’), deterministic (‘the market has determined’), and salvific and punitive (‘market has rewarded/punished’). It is also, par excellence, the sphere of ‘freedom’ - the market makes you free, you shall be free indeed!

Globalisation

Globalisation takes the discourse of the market to a new level. Let us examine the notion of a world market. The notion of ‘marketplace’ evokes deep roots in village and communal life, where suppliers and purchasers of goods and services trade what they have for what they want, and both meet their needs in a free and uncoerced fashion. It is, therefore, by definition, a local affair, grounded in notions of equality, freedom, honour and personal, face to face, transactions. Of course, this image of the bucolic marketplace was already a myth – the village market embodied relations of domination and coercion weighted in favour of those who possessed the most and set the rules. But as Marx has shown, the onset of industrial capitalist production fundamentally alters the market. For now it is not different consumers as producers trading commodities as equals to meet their respective needs, but as producers and consumers, or more precisely, as owners and workers, entering the market on different terms, that these relations of domination become intensified. Key to Marx’s analysis is that two different market cycles are established, that of consumption (C-M-C) and that of capital (M-C-M1).

The consumption cycle, C-M-C, is the cycle which is seen to exemplify market relations. I sell a commodity (C) to get money (M) to buy other commodities I need (C). There is thus an equivalence
between the commodities. What changes significantly with industrial capitalism a new commodity enters the equation, human labour. Because of the process of industrialisation has produced a class of people who no longer own land or other means of subsistence, the only commodity they have to bring to the market is that of their labour. This they sell to get money to buy other commodities which they need to survive. Labour, as commodity, is thus equivalent to other commodities in the formula. Humans are reduced to the level of things (reification) and things become social (fetishisation).

The other market cycle which emerges with capitalism is the cycle of capital, where I convert money (M) into commodities (C) to make more money (M1). This cycle, in Marx’s analysis, is the real cycle of capitalism, it is the deep structure which underlies the C-M-C cycle. As long as one’s economic activities are tied to the cycle of consumption, one remains outside the realm of real power and wealth. One can even posses many commodities (be conspicuously consumptive) but not be part of the M-C-M1 cycle. Likewise, one can be frugal at the level of C-M-C but be immensely powerful at the level of M-C-M1. Moralistic critiques of consumption, therefore, so prevalent on the left, actually miss the point. Likewise, the condescending criticisms made by those in the latter cycle (old money) of the consumptive patterns of non-owners made good (‘I would never buy Italian shoes or drive a BMW’) likewise hide real relations of power and wealth.

What has become possible with the emergence of the global electronic marketplace is another cycle, M-M-M1. This is the cycle of finance and speculation, in which money itself is the commodity which is traded. In this cycle, the mystification of the market is complete. Here we remain locked in the world of exchange values, at no point do ‘use values’ intrude. This cycle has been likened to ‘casino’ circulation, where money directly begets money through money. In this cycle, not only is labour excluded, but also commodities in their usual form.

In analysing globalisation, it is important to understand which forms of circulation are being globalised. If markets involve three actors: money, commodities, and labour, then it is clear that the rhetoric of freedom of global markets is primarily freedom for the first – money. Restrictions on the these three markets take different forms: exchange controls for money, tariffs and protectionism for commodities, and immigration laws and work permits for labour. Analysing the rhetoric of freedom in terms of these markets, it is apparent that the greatest sin against the Market is any restriction on the former. Money, or finance, must be able to flow freely, and if not, then the Market will punish you. It is currency controls, therefore, that have come under the most relentless attack. The rhetoric of freedom in the flow of commodities, however, is less uniform. It is also one sided. It is legitimate for a powerful country to impose tariffs to protect its traditional industries (especially farm products), but is not legitimate for a poorer country to do the same. In terms of labour, however, the discourse of globalisation and freedom is completely one-sided. Labour markets internally must be free (no unions, no minimum wages, flexibility), but externally completely unfree. The highest of barriers to the free movement of labour must be erected to prevent the poor flocking to the areas of the rich. In other words, freedom works in one direction only, freedom for the powerful and coercion and protectionism against the weaker.

These three markets can also be differentiated by their different embodiments of time and space. The first market C-M-C is a local market constrained by both time and space. Both the sale of labour and the purchase of commodities as use values (food, clothing, other possessions) roots the market very firmly in time and space. One cannot sell labour remotely (although in certain knowledge industries this is becoming more and more feasible), and the purchase of commodities for use involves time and space (although one might purchase ‘virtual commodities’ such as knowledge and entertainment in such a way that space is overcome).

The second market M-C-M1 is increasingly less constrained by space (the globalisation of investment opportunities) but remains constrained by time (as it involves investment in commodities). The cycle implies that investment is of a longer term, as it involves time in bringing about the growth (return) on the investment. However, even in this market, the emergence of, for instance, futures markets and derivative trading shifts begins the process of collapsing the time dimension as well.

The final market collapses both time and space. This is a completely ‘virtual’ market, where time is instantaneous, and space is irrelevant. This financial market is therefore the most attractive to speculators, as they can move in and out of large positions with tremendous facility. They also do not have to worry about such mundane things as equipment, labour, machinery, purchasing and warehousing of stock, etc.--all those things that tie one to time and space, to the textures of lives, communities and cultures, of norms and values and human feelings and responsibilities. It is, in the crassest form, the realisation of the dream of the completely free market.

The consequences of its actions, are, however, felt with devastating effect by those whose lives are created and destroyed by the movements of this market. This is the truth that is only now being tentatively grasped, even by those prophets of this market like George Soros who have been its primary beneficiaries.

**Co-opted language**

For discussion, I think we might look at how there is a significant overlap between corporate language and religious language in the following concepts, which I simply list for discussion without any further comment:

- Value (and values)
- Equity (and equity)
- Transformation

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