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“Theses Against Occultism Today: Towards Capitalism as Occultism?”

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This paper looks at aspects of Adorno’s writings on occultism, as found in §151 of *Minima Moralia* entitled ‘Theses Against Occultism’, and in the text *The Stars Down to Earth.* These writings have received relatively little attention in existing literature, even in theorizations that look specifically at the intersection of capitalism and religion. In this speculative (and, hopefully, suggestive) paper, my aims are twofold. Firstly, I hope to provide a reading of Adorno’s theorization of the intersection of occultism and capitalism that potentially rivals readings of capitalism as religion. Secondly, I aim to demonstrate what I take to be the most prescient elements of Adorno’s theorization of occultism for analyzing capitalist culture today. I will begin with a short section that draws a contrast between Adorno’s notion of occultism and Benjamin’s *Capitalism as Religion.* I try to show that, as suggestive as Benjamin’s fragment is, it is also insubstantial, inasmuch as it fails to address aspects of capitalism that do no gibe with the religious comparisons Benjamin wants to establish. In focusing on the most prescient parts of Adorno’s writings on occultism, I then try to argue that Adorno’s writings address these comparisons in a fruitful manner.

If time permits, I will also give some consideration as to what place Adorno’s theorization of occultism has in the contemporary cultural context. While it is true that Adorno ties occultist practices to capitalist culture of his time, the popularity of occultism in the form of the ‘new age’ movement, and its dissemination into popular culture, has dramatically expanded in the intervening years. This leads me to argue that Adornian occultism is now more insidious and widespread. This is because many non-occultist aspects of neo-liberal capitalist culture have taken on the characteristics Adorno uses in his writings on occultism. Roughly speaking, I think Adorno’s description of occultism as a system of beliefs that purportedly provide access to a good life through individual adherence to the irrational/rational practices of occultism in a chaotic, potentially apocalyptic world, capture something of the prevalent objective and subjective attitudes towards capitalism and life under capitalism in our time.
1. Benjamin: Capitalism as Religion

*Capitalism as Religion* is a compelling fragment that presents Benjamin at his most gnomic. In the text, Benjamin states that “Capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. Capitalism is an essentially religious phenomenon”. He goes on to say that capitalism is a “pure religious cult, perhaps the most extreme there ever was” and draws four parallels between capitalism and religion. Yet, for all its suggestiveness, the fragment is lacking in detail (although this has not prevented Giorgio Agamben from assimilating its ideas into his own work, perhaps even encouraging it; see Agamben, 2007).

Benjamin’s and Agamben’s influential works, respectively, compare capitalism and religion in, what I will term, a formal functional sense. That is to say, both argue that capitalism has broadly similar characteristics to religion to the extent that people’s attitudes towards religion formally resemble their attitude towards capitalism, and that what they describe as their attitude, or perhaps the act of worship towards capitalism, resembles cultic or sacred attitudes of worship.

Yet despite the scintillating picture we get of capitalism as a religion, one cannot help but notice at least four major differences between the depictions of religion and capitalism, respectively. These may be summarized as follows:

1. Capitalism is premised upon the atomized individual, whereas religion is greatly focused on ‘the flock’ – that is, groups of believers rather than individual believers.

2. Religions have universal-moral commandments that must be followed if a person is to be deemed good and attain a religious conception of the good life. In contrast, capitalism does not contain any such universal-moral commandments in its corporeal vision of the good life, concomitant as it is with financial success, luxury, abundance, leisure, ever-increasing consumer choice, and so on.

3. In religion, God is the ultimate explanation that provides order to the universe, through which everything that happens is (usually) ultimately seen as the result of a pure, good, all-knowing intelligence that is beyond human comprehension. Although this is similar in many ways to an irrational faith in the ‘market’, the latter – particularly nowadays – is not seen as infallible.
O’Kane: Theses Against Occultism Today

The economic crisis, while depicted by many as the natural downside to capitalism, has not – with the possible exception of some whackos – been perceived to have happened as part of a wiser, preordained, grand and good plan.

(4) Redemption, even in the afterlife, is an inherent part of religious belief, while any type of redemption that occurs in capitalism happens during this lifetime. Moreover, redemption in capitalism is not linked to an adherence to universal morals, but rather to the achievement of individual happiness and/or success.

What Adorno describes as occultism, in contrast, does seem to resemble capitalism on these four major points. Regarding the first, occultism is premised upon the atomized individual. Its morality and ethics is premised upon idiosyncratic individual behaviour leading to a good life that resembles success and happiness. Occultism has a chaotic metaphysics where ‘shit happens’, which is somewhat akin to the ‘natural downside’ of the free market. Occultism also entails a notion of redemption that is corporeal and achieved through the individual following these idiosyncratic edicts.

In turning to Adorno’s writings on occultism, I will focus on these prescient aspects, which I take to have accrued increasing relevance since their initial publication.

2. Adorno: Theses Against Occultism

In many ways, the theorizations contained in ‘Theses Against Occultism’ represent a kind of ‘greatest hits’ of Adorno’s critical social theory, with the nine theses providing a sort of case study of some of Adorno’s most utilized concepts. Oddly enough, occultism itself is never defined. But Adorno’s caustic descriptions of it cover a number of practices from astrology to fortune-telling and mysticism, all of which are based on irrational systems of thought that purportedly provide people with esoteric knowledge meant to be utilized to achieve some form of happiness, success or well-being. Adorno, in contrast, argues that occultism is a form of (ir)rationality that is ultimately social ideology because the occultist system of beliefs that purportedly provide access to a means of ascertaining a good life through individual adherence to esoteric knowledge is actually mediated by and reflects the late capitalist social totality. Adorno’s explanation of why this is the case begins with the fetish. Here, Adorno’s Lukácsian inspired use of Marx’s fetish-character of commodities is re-assimilated to its religious and
superstitious etymology. But, importantly, its use for Adorno retains its Marxian – that is to say, social – basis. As Adorno states:

The occultist draws the ultimate conclusion from the fetish-character of commodities; menacingly objectified labour assails him on all sides from demonically grimacing objects. What has been forgotten in a world congealed into products, the fact that it has been produced by men, is split off and misremembered as a being-in-itself added to that of the objects and equivalent to them. Because objects have frozen in the cold light of reason, lost their illusory animation, the social quality that now animates them is given an independent existence both natural and supernatural, a thing among things (2005: 239)

The social basis of occultism is then produced (and reproduced) by the following: the underlying social paradox of the unconscious creation of an alienated world – i.e. late capitalism – that dominates its creators. Crucially, this objective socio-natural world of reified things possesses a fetish-character, which in the case of occultism gives occultist things a “natural and supernatural” quality (Adorno, 2005: 239). This occultist quality, of course, veils the true socially alienated conditions that construct these supernatural things by displacing the power and potential of the social into the false surrogate of occultism upon which human needs and desires are projected. These false surrogates are the occultist bases for esoteric knowledge – such as astrological signs, and so forth – which, as Adorno argues, deny the alienation of which it is itself proof and product, and concocts surrogates for non-existent experience.

There is, then, also a psychological element to occultism. The latter is also a psychologically fetishized object of consciousness. It is a form of regression conforming to the social fetish, the supposedly objective and naturalized world of late capitalism. In Adorno’s words, “By its regression to magic under late capitalism, thought is assimilated to late capitalist forms” (2005: 239). This is because, again, in Adorno’s own words:

Occultism is a reflex-action to the subjectification of all meaning, the complement of reification. If, to the living, objective reality seems deaf as never before, they try to elicit meaning from it by saying abracadabra (2005: 240)

Abracadabra, as an attempt at ascertaining meaning from objective reality, is where the irrational/rational aspect of occultism comes in. Because socially constructed objective reality has turned against its creators and is deaf to
their needs, and because consciousness has regressed, occultism becomes the outlet for rational needs displaced onto irrational objects. This displacement, however, is ultimately ideological because this displacement is not only focused on the wrong objects – the stars instead of society – but also because the occultist readings of the stars and other phenomena harmonize with prevailing interests and serve to reinforce the status quo.

[Occultism] offers the advantage of veiling all deeper-lying causes of distress and thus promoting acceptance of the given. Moreover, by strengthening the sense of fatality, dependence and obedience, it paralyzes the will to change objective conditions in any respect and relegates all worries to a private plane promising a cure – all by the very same compliance which prevents a change of conditions. It can easily be seen how well this suits the over-all purpose of the prevailing ideology of today’s culture industry; to reproduce the status quo within the mind of the people (Adorno, 2002: 164)

This is, then, a brief outline of Adorno’s position on the conditions of occultism and of what occultism in the form of astrology consists. As we have seen, occultism is a form of rationality/irrationality that functions as a social ideology. As a set of practices, occultism is based on Marxian-Lukácsian and Freudian conceptions of the fetish-character that project rational needs onto the irrational. These factors are objectively and subjectively intertwined. **Objectively** they mediate occultism by naturalizing the system which it takes as a given, embedding the individual in the chaotic and perilous capitalist world. Meanwhile, **subjectively** they conjure a form of reflection that promotes a notion of the good life that is solely the province of individual actions, perfectly in accordance with the pre-dominant capitalist hegemony.

Now, let us turn to examining the four similarities between capitalism and occultism, where the Marxian-Lukácsian social basis and fetish character of occultism are more effectively put to work by Adorno. The Marxian-Lukácsian notion of fetishism highlights the naturalizing and objectivizing of the capitalist world that occultism and capitalism take for granted. This is why Adorno argues that the metaphysics of occultism naturalize late capitalism. The astrological column contains all elements of fetishized reality, somehow capturing the actual state of affairs in the process, but nevertheless constructing a distorted picture of the objective forces beyond the range of individual psychology. As a result of this misconception or oversight, individual behaviours become exempt from further scrutiny as they are endowed with metaphysical dignity in the protean lingo of quasi-
autonomy, coping mechanisms, self-determination, self-help, self-development, and so on.

Furthermore, Adorno argues that these very same occultist metaphysics naturalize the individual as the centre of action. Within the framework of astrological columns, individuals are given numerous yet vague edicts that advise idiosyncratic and various forms of action, which are meant to deliver some manner of wellbeing, success, happiness, etc. Here we see the crisis-ridden, authoritarian and socially atomized late capitalist world naturalized and turned into the metaphysical basis of occultism, wherein individuals pursue happiness through occultist and esoteric knowledge. But, as social ideology, the underlying authoritarian structure of late capitalism frames the forms of conduct this knowledge directs. This can be seen in three of the authoritarian and conformist aspects of the astrological columns Adorno outlines, where apparent freedom and right action rebound back into conformity with capitalism.

(1) The paradox of freedom to conform. Here, astrology “attempts to get away from crude and unpopular fatalism by establishing outward forces operating on the individual decision, including the individual’s own character, but leaves the ultimate choice to him” (Adorno, 2002: 60).

(2) Making best of what your astrological sign dictates. Here, freedom consists of the individual taking upon herself merely that which is inevitable in any case. The empty shell of liberty is solicitously kept intact. If the individual acts according to given conjunctions, everything will be right; if she does not, everything will go wrong.

(3) The fact that it is often frankly stated that the individual should adjust to certain constellations. As Adorno argues, “One might say that there is in astrology an implicit metaphysics of adjustment behind the concretistic advice of adjustment in everyday life” (2002: 61). These instances – three out of many – serve to demonstrate both the similarity of capitalist and occultist notions of action leading to success, reward, happiness, and so forth, as well as their ultimate ideological character.

Returning to the four points of disparity between religion and capitalism that I mentioned towards the start of the paper, I believe that Adorno’s writings on occultism give an indication that the latter, more so than Benjamin’s take on religion, can be said to resemble capitalism. As we have seen, occultism as system of practices purportedly based on esoteric
knowledge meant to lead to some form of wellbeing, happiness or good life, is actually based on the fetishized naturalization of the individual embedded in a crisis-ridden, chaotic world that renders the conditions of late capitalism into metaphysics. Within this world, individual action is the only basis for some notion of happiness or success, which must be arrived at through actions that – as, ultimately, social ideology – serve to reinforce late capitalism. It therefore appears that Adorno's writings on occultism provide a nuanced description of the entwinement of irrationality and capitalism that Benjamin's fragment on capitalism as religions lacks.

3. Occultism Today

If this is the case, then what is the current status of occultism and its relation to capitalism over half a century after Adorno published his writings? I think we can only say that it is much more pronounced because both capitalism and occultism are more pronounced. Not only were Adorno's writings previous to the 'new age' movement and its dissemination into popular culture, but they were also previous to the neo-liberal privatization and fetishization of the market. Let me then suggest a number of phenomena that seem to resemble occultism.

To begin with, popular culture is rife with products that resemble the Adornian occult. First, there is the explosion in popularity of the occult itself. Second, there is the ubiquity of the self-help industry and advice books on anything from wellbeing to achieving your business goals in so many easy steps. Third, there is the prevalence of pop-psychology, to which Adorno had already described as a social drug similar to astrology. One could only imagine what his reaction would be to happiness consultants and the newest pop-psychology – so-called 'positive psychology' – which treats happiness as the sole province of your actions. This particularly egregious form of pop-psychology even has several MA programmes, a Journal of Happiness Studies, and boasts works such as Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness: Using New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Last Fulfilment. These and others seem to resemble Adornian occultism in taking the now neo-liberal world as a given and promoting an irrational/rational ethics of personal action to cultivate success or fulfilment, all while reinforcing the very conditions that are naturalized as a given in the first place. In addition, it seems that an argument might also be made that a dialectical reversal of sorts has occurred in terms of neo-liberalism possessing an occult attitude towards capitalism or the free market, privatization and politics, whereby such entities are fetishized as possessing a sort of supernatural power that acts as
a standard with which irrational/rational actions must be in accordance.

Here, in terms of attitudes towards capitalism itself, crisis and meltdown resemble the chaos of occult metaphysics. They are not examined as an inherent part of unfettered capitalism that can be changed, but instead are treated as a sort of natural tribulation that is par for the course. As such, it must simply be endured and fixed or adjusted, in order to return things to their normal neo-liberal glory. Many of the bailout plans themselves seem to resemble the picture Adorno paints of occultist practice as a combination of blind belief and panic where reasonable policies are taboo and superstitious edicts that preserve the market must be kept in place.

Privatization is another one of these supernatural policies which is naturally assumed to provide the best outcome, but is implemented solely on the basis of this superstition. As we all know, this leads to the creation of absurd documents that resemble Adorno’s take on astrology through the invention of preposterous language and schema to supposedly explain but to really justify or preserve their status within privatization (see, for instance, the latest Arts & Humanities Research Council document which provides a schematic ordering of disciplines – where ‘critical theory’ is arbitrarily positioned to overlap something like ‘medieval literature’ – with newly invented market-friendly qualities).

Neo-liberal and post-modern identity politics also pose some interesting resemblances to occultism. To begin with, both tend to naturalize capitalism and individualism. Additionally, politics – or at least political identity – is not seen as part of a mass movement towards some sort of utopia. Instead it is seen as something that is inherently political; a kind of moral-supernatural category where the individual’s identity – be it Christian, Muslim, green, liberal, etc. – is tied in with an avowed political notion of the good life that often entirely disregards politics. In the end, as Brennan (2006) has well shown, this merely reinforces the neo-liberal system. With such things in mind, perhaps we can move towards an understanding of capitalism in our time as, in many ways, occultist.

Conclusion

This highly speculative paper examined Adorno’s writings on occultism from several viewpoints. In terms of examining the theological aspects of capitalism, I argued that Adornian occultism dealt with four important intersections between capitalism and occultism that both Benjamin’s and
Agamben’s writings ignore. Focusing on these aspects of Adorno’s writings brought out these missing elements, while also highlighting their prescience. In providing a sketch of how they may relate to our contemporary context, I argued for Adorno’s increasing relevance. While this paper admittedly has much lacking in terms of rigor and focus, it is my hope that, in following a stylistic tradition of which Adorno was an undisputed master, the exaggerations and speculations herein provoke thought and debate.

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Endnotes

1 This paper, composed specifically for the Adorno conference, marks an attempt to adapt his ideas on occultism to the initial phases of the financial crisis in order to generate speculation, reflection and debate on the objective and subjective status of contemporary capitalist society. It has not been modified for publication, for while revision could have ironed out the many kinks, expanded the compressions, and offered more bases for the speculations, this would have also undermined the paper’s intent. Now, in the later phases of the financial crisis, I remain intrigued by the notion of describing capitalism as occultist, and am reasonably pleased with some of the analyses of neo-liberal occultist practices. Should you be intrigued by the speculations herein, I would happily discuss them via email.

Bibliography


