

Modernity Without Capitalism: Pandemic and the End of Fetishism

Todd McGowan

Sacrificing the Sacred

Capitalism depends on the fetishistic disavowal of the sacrifice that it demands. Without the possibility for this disavowal, the capitalist system cannot sustain itself. From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, capitalism's dependence on sacrifice has become impossible to miss. And as conservative leaders have asked us to be willing to sacrifice our lives for the sake of the capitalist economy, the fetishistic disavowal of this sacrifice becomes increasingly harder to sustain. By underlining the role that sacrifice plays in the production and reproduction of capital, we highlight the weak point of the capitalist system.

In prior social epochs, the social structure itself demanded sacrifice. One was a subject to the monarch and had to sacrifice for the sake of the monarch. In the case of war, the monarch could demand the lives of the subjects. What distinguishes capitalist modernity is that it no longer makes an explicit demand for sacrifice; but at the same time, it cannot avoid sacrifice altogether since sacrifice is the source of enjoyment within a social order. A society without sacrifice would be a society without a form of enjoyment that united people and would thus cease to cohere as a society.

Totem and Taboo announces Freud's theory of how the social order distributes enjoyment. It does this through an account of the myth of the primal horde. In this myth, the leader, a primal father, has exclusive rights to all the women of the horde. The male members of the horde, the group of brothers, must live without any sexual enjoyment. The father of the horde

hoards all enjoyment but the brothers do not just remain content in their situation of lack; they revolt and kill the father in order to obtain his enjoyment for themselves.

The revolution that the brothers enact fails to produce the promised enjoyment. The death of the father eliminates his monopoly on the enjoyment of women, but in order to avoid recreating such a monopoly, the brothers have to interdict it and accept a mutual restriction when it comes to enjoyment: no one can any longer have it all. This leads Freud to claim that the dead father created an even more effective prohibition of unrestrained enjoyment than he did while alive. As Freud conceives it, the prohibition of incest is the common name for this ban on unrestricted enjoyment.

The act of sacrifice marks this ban; we announce it anew with every communal act of sacrifice. For Freud, every sacrifice is a sacrifice of the primal father and the unrestrained enjoyment that he represents. In *Totem and Taboo*, he writes, “the object of the act of sacrifice has always been the same—namely what is now worshipped as God, that is to say, the father.”¹ We always sacrifice the figure of the father because every sacrifice rearticulates the prohibition of unrestricted enjoyment associated with the primal father.

But this primal father is mythic, and just as there is no primal father, there is no unrestrained enjoyment. The idea of an unrestrained enjoyment is purely imaginary but recognizing this does not render sacrifice unnecessary or liberate us to enjoy without restraint. In order to make the idea of unrestrained enjoyment appear possible, we sacrifice into being, the father and his equivalents. In the process, we not only construct an ideological lure that drives people to seek after this impossibility, we also create a social bond.

Even though he is not exactly aware of it himself, what Freud uncovers with his myth of the primal father’s murder is the basis for what forms a society: sacrifice is requisite for society.

Sacrifice is socially necessary because it creates a social bond through a shared loss. The shared loss not only gives the members of the society something in common, but it also offers them a form of enjoyment that distinguishes them from those who do not belong to the society. The shared loss is also a site of shared enjoyment.

Sacrifice is essential to enjoyment because it is only through the sacrifice that we produce an object that we cannot have. The sacrificial object enters into a realm beyond the empirical through the sacrificial act. By introducing an absence into the social order, sacrifice creates a nonempirical object that has a transcendent value. By sacrificing, we indicate our shared belief that there is a value beyond the merely positive and empirical and as such, sacrifice the sacred into existence.

This becomes evident in the case of Christ. Christ becomes a sacred figure through death. Had Christ not died, he would not have the divine status that he does in people's minds. His death elevates him into a transcendent figure whom one can enjoy. It also allows believers to form a Christian community around the event of his death. What Christ calls the holy spirit is, as he himself says, nothing but the Christian community that his sacrifice generates. The existence of the holy spirit requires the death of Christ. Subsequently, the Christian community keeps itself alive by replaying the sacrifice again and again through the sacrament of the Eucharist. Sacrifice holds a community together by giving its members a shared loss that acts as a source for their shared enjoyment. Although Freud does not go this far in his theorizing of sacrifice, he nonetheless points us in this direction. The act of sacrifice provides a site through which we can enjoy ourselves as a collective. This is why it recurs so often in human history and why even the pragmatic imperative of capitalist modernity cannot do away with it.

Sacrificing the Congo

Sacrifice persists in capitalism through the production and exchange of commodities but it persists in an obscure form. It seems as if the persistence of sacrifice is purely contingent, which happens because we have not become fully modern or because we have slipped back into some barbarism. The overarching ideology of capitalist modernity rejects sacrifice out of hand, but the functioning of capitalist modernity avoids it. The persistence of sacrifice reveals the truth of capitalism—its addiction to senseless sacrifice.

Capitalist modernity appears to institute a form of society that no longer requires sacrifice, which marks its break from traditional society. Capitalist modernity, however, treats members of the society as isolated individuals rather than as a collective. This dispersion as subjects testifies to the fact that sacrifice does not appear requisite.

The bond that exists between these isolated individuals of capitalist modernity is one of interest. Adam Smith provides the most famous articulation of this bond in *The Wealth of Nations*. He writes, “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages.”² Here, Smith notes that it is precisely the self-interest of each member of society that unites them together, that provides our social glue. Because he is an ahistorical thinker, Smith universalizes this claim; he believes that it pertains to all societies and all economic forms, not just capitalist modernity. Confining Smith’s insight to this epoch makes it much more tenable. If Smith is correct and self-interest is the sole binding force in capitalist modernity, this means that this social form functions without sacrifice.

When we look superficially at our society today, it is difficult to see overt manifestations of sacrifice, thus proving Smith's point. But if we look closely at the variegations of capitalist modernity, we will recognize that sacrifice remains just as necessary in this social structure as it was for the Aztecs. Instead of ripping the beating heart out of a sacrificial victim, capitalism sacrifices workers in inhuman conditions, demands that consumers sacrifice their time for useless commodities, and creates spectacles dedicated to an enormous sacrifice of resources.

If we examine the structure of the commodity, the role of sacrifice in capitalist society becomes apparent as every commodity requires labor to produce it. Part of this labor is merely useful and does not involve an act of sacrifice but, if the laborer did not put more work into creating the commodity than was necessary for reproducing the system of production, there would be no profit for the capitalist; the laborer has to do more. Laborers sacrifice their excess labor for the sake of the capitalist's profit.

At times, laborers' sacrifice becomes more pronounced, as we see with young children mining cobalt in the Congo today or young girls destroying their lives to make lace in nineteenth-century Manchester. The destruction of lives that occurs during the production process plays a key role in the creation of value; we cherish iPhones just like people cherished fine lace. In each case, the human cost of production is part of the consumption of the commodity, even if we are not consciously thinking about this cost while enjoying the commodity.

Even workers who do not have to descend into makeshift mines nonetheless must sacrifice for the sake of capital. As a laborer in the capitalist system, one must sacrifice one's time and health for the sake of the production of surplus value and it is this surplus value that translates into the capitalist's profit. It is, however, also one source of the consumer's enjoyment

when purchasing the commodity: that someone has labored in the production of a commodity is what makes the consumer's enjoyment of it possible.

Under capitalism, sacrifice is not just confined to the production side of the commodity. The enjoyment that comes from purchasing a commodity derives from the sacrifice of money—that is, the sacrifice of the time that it took to earn the money—that one uses to buy it. This is why commodities that we obtain for free are so much less enjoyable than those that we pay for. Payment is a sacrifice of money that produces enjoyment.

Sacrifice has an inverse relationship to use. Commodities that are useful—nutritious food, shelter, basic transportation, toilets, and so on—provide less enjoyment for us than commodities lacking a clear utility. Their utility detracts from the enjoyment that they provide. This is clearest in the case of food. When we know that a food is healthy, we enjoy it less than when we know that a food damages us. The damaging food—chocolate cake, doughnuts, Twinkies—produces bodily pleasure through its sweetness, but it is the damage that it does to us that is the source of enjoyment. When we alter such commodities to make them healthier (by making a chocolate cake with a natural sugar substitute, for instance), we subtract from the enjoyment that we derive from it. Knowing that it harms us is inextricable from enjoying the food.

While we know that certain commodities harm us and enjoy through this harm, we nonetheless disavow it as we are enjoying; we must know and not know. Freud describes our ability to know and not know at the same time as fetishism. Fetishism allows us to have our cake and eat it too, to have satisfaction without avowing the role that loss or sacrifice plays in this satisfaction. In this sense, it removes the trauma inherent in all our satisfaction. The fetish, according to Freud, gives one a short cut to enjoyment that non-fetishists do not have. In his

essay on fetishism, Freud points out that the fetish “is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it. What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all.”³ The fetish enables one to enjoy easily and publicly, without going through all the difficulty involved with sexual relations. The fetish appears to be a shortcut to enjoyment that permits enjoyment without loss. But one does not avoid loss and sacrifice through the fetish, one merely tells oneself that one does not know about it.

Corona and Its Discontents

The coronavirus outbreak has made clear the role of sacrifice in capitalist society. The favorite line of Donald Trump and his followers during the disaster was revelatory in this regard. Trump tweeted a sentiment that had widespread support from conservative leaders and commentators: “WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF.”⁴ According to this logic, the economic damage of the state’s decrees to shut down businesses and isolate people in their dwellings outweighed the lives that such decrees saved.

Trump’s eagerness to restart the economy cannot simply be reduced to concern about his election prospects. A million corpses would create a considerable argument against returning him to power. One would think that minimizing the body count would be foremost in his mind if reelection was the only concern, but Trump has completely identified his own political interests with the interests of capital. Despite his affection for barriers, Trump was reluctant to put up barriers between people because he recognized that such barriers would block the accumulation of capital.

One of Trump’s epigones, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick of Texas, suggested that we openly accept capitalism’s demand for sacrifice. As he saw it, the coronavirus outbreak gave us the opportunity to enjoy the sacrificial logic of capitalism without needing to disavow it. He

thought we should jump at the opportunity. At the onset of the coronavirus epidemic, he took advantage of a platform on FOX News and proclaimed, “No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that’s the exchange, I’m all in.”⁵ Patrick not only preaches sacrifice for others, but like a good pastor, includes himself among those being offered up so that capitalism might live.

Patrick’s macabre quid pro quo occasioned outrage from a variety of sites. But no one pointed out that Patrick was not so much articulating a thought-out political position as giving voice to the unvarnished logic of capitalism. For this, we should heartily thank him. If capitalism could speak, it would speak with Patrick’s southern accent, offering the kind of homespun wisdom that would consign millions to death.

Despite the American investment in the logic of capitalism, Patrick’s call for an embrace of death did not find widespread acceptance. Why not? To find the answer, we can look to one of the great television events of the 2000s—*Mad Men*. This series, with its focus on the travails of an advertising agency in the 1960s, goes a long way toward unpacking how capitalism functions. Its lessons have still not been fully learned. If we look at just the first episode of the series, we can see why Patrick’s call received derision rather than embrace.

The Sterling Cooper advertising agency begins the series looking for a new way to advertise cigarettes. Don Draper (Jon Hamm) believes that advertising sells an image of happiness to customers, but a woman working for him, Dr. Greta Guttman (Gordana Rashovich), proposes an alternative marketing strategy. Instead of selling happiness, they could be open about the destructiveness of cigarettes. Guttman contends that they could sell more cigarettes by appealing directly to Freud’s concept of the death drive. If people enjoy their self-sacrifice, as

Freud claims, the agency could make it the basis of the advertising campaign. Guttman tells Don, “Before the war, when I studied with Adler in Vienna, we postulated that what Freud called the ‘death wish’ is as powerful a drive as those for sexual reproduction and physical sustenance.”⁶ Wisely, Don rejects this line of thinking: he is an advertising genius because he grasps the role that fetishistic disavowal plays in our enjoyment.

Don rejects Guttman’s proposal in favor of marketing a fantasy that obscures the link between cigarettes and death. He claims that what they are advertising is “freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance that whatever you’re doing is OK.”⁷ Don’s decision to market cigarettes with a fantasy of reassurance instead of an open avowal of the death drive is a good decision from a marketing perspective. The death drive campaign would have surely failed.

Guttman is correct in her assessment that the enjoyment of cigarettes is tied to the death that they ultimately cause. There is no enjoyment of cigarettes without the destruction that they bring. With each puff that one enjoys, it is precisely one’s own demise that provides the enjoyment. What Guttman does not realize is that this enjoyment depends on not knowing what we know.

That *Mad Men* begins as a series with the possibility of marketing the death drive and the avowal of sacrifice is revelatory. No one ever again mentions this possibility—or even Freud’s name—throughout the entire run of the series. The enjoyment of smoking is inextricably linked to death, but to link cigarette smoking overtly to death is to make the enjoyment of smoking impossible. Our enjoyment depends on our ability to not confront what we know, to know and not know simultaneously. When one smokes, one must fetishistically disavow the destruction that cigarettes do. This disavowal is the key to our ability to enjoy smoking.

The connection between capitalism and sacrifice that Dr. Greta Guttman wanted to foreground in a cigarette advertisement becomes evident not just with a single commodity but with the commodity as such when we look at the contemporary pandemic. All of a sudden, the fetishistic disavowal of sacrifice becomes impossible to sustain.

A pandemic brings explicit sacrifice to consciousness. It no longer occurs in a capitalist form that we must fetishistically disavow but instead, we experience undeniable sacrifice without respite. In this sense, the pandemic changes the nature of capitalist modernity. It does not eliminate capitalism, but it reveals a cleavage between capitalism and modernity and reveals the possibility of a different modern existence.

The bond that forms through the shared sacrifice of the pandemic is not the bond that Adam Smith theorizes in *The Wealth of Nations*. It is not the bond of isolated individuals who come together through their self-interested production and consumption. The bond forged by the pandemic is tenuous. At any moment, a Hobbesian war of all against all threatens to break out.

Capitalism demands that we sacrifice in the name of more. The promise of accumulation is a promise of enjoyment deferred into the future, an enjoyment that will always surpass anything that we could imagine. Capitalism survives by continually breaking this promise and never delivering the promised enjoyment. Our libidinal tie to capitalism stems as much from our constant disappointment as from the satisfaction that comes from not obtaining what we believe we will obtain. The pandemic overturns this logic; instead of a promise of more, in the time of the pandemic one simply desires enough.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 13, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), 151.

² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Hamburg: Management Laboratory Press, 2008), 21–22.

³ Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 154.

⁴ Qtd. in Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, "Trump Says Coronavirus Cure Cannot 'Be Worse Than the Problem Itself,'" *New York Times* (23 March 2020): <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-restrictions.html>.

⁵ Paul LeBlanc, "Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick: 'I'm All In' on Risking My Health To Lift Social Distancing Guidelines For Economic Boost," *CNN* (24 March 2020): <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/23/politics/coronavirus-texas-social-distancing-guidelines/index.html>.

⁶ *Mad Men*, Episode 1, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," created by Matt Weiner, aired 19 July 2007 on AMC.

⁷ *Ibid.*