

## Symposium: Lucia Hulsether's *Capitalist Humanitarianism*

# Editor's Introduction on Lucia Hulsether's *Capitalist Humanitarianism*

**CAPITALIST HUMANITARIANISM.** By Lucia Hulsether. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. ix-248. Paper, \$26.95.

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### Key words

*religion and capitalism, humanitarianism, decolonization, neoliberalism*

Fair-trade, microfinance, and impact investing. These are some of the market solutions plutocrats, and well-meaning entrepreneurs promote as more socially just forms of capitalism. On these terms, the death and destruction wrought by the capitalist organization of the world need not be. Capitalism can be decolonized, or at least reconstructed to repair the harm of a brutal but bygone era. Lucia Hulsether gives us a name for the projects that peddle this self-aware hope for a reformed capitalism, which is also the title of her book and the subject of this Symposium: *Capitalist Humanitarianism*.

This Symposium engages the histories, methods, and interventions of *Capitalist Humanitarianism*. The Symposium was first organized as panel at the 2023 annual meeting of American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, Texas, and moderated by Linn Tonstad. Unfortunately, the songs that each panelist chose to accompany their walk to the podium are not represented in the contributions that follow. But the panelists have tweaked and revised their remarks for publication, which also includes a response from Lucia Hulsether.

"[F]or every capitalist humanitarian venture I studied," Hulsether writes, "some liberal Protestant affinity would reveal itself lurking behind the curtain" (77). Whereas recent works in the field have recounted the blessed ties that bind conservative Christianities, nationalist racial regimes, and neoliberalism, *Capitalist Humanitarianism* shows how progressive and Left-Christian denominations and churches pioneered the cultural politics of a pervasive but understudied expression of neoliberal capitalism. The book details how "grounded critiques of neocolonial dispossession and racist dispossession" by, for

example, Central American solidarity activists well-versed in liberation theology, were metabolized and absorbed into "a sweeping ideological project to make anti-capitalist dissent into a neoliberal *raison d'être*" (12). Across a series of historical and ethnographic case studies, Hulsether offers a sharp analysis and ruthless critique of the institutional and affective structures of this new terrain, which establishes and maintains free markets as an imagined "domain of political solidarity" (15).

*Capitalist Humanitarianism* also challenges critics of religion and capitalism to carefully consider the form of criticism and to move beyond "the conventions of exposé that are already fully factored into neoliberal institution building" (3). In other words, given that the cultural politics of capitalist humanitarianism depend on "performances of self-critique [and] historical awareness" (1) to reproduce and expand its deadly markets, how does the critical scholar resist incorporation? As Hulsether states, the problem she faced while writing the book, "The days of translating field notes into readable prose became a long confrontation with how the sentences and paragraphs I wrote would interact with those processes" of capture by capitalist humanitarianism's historical sensibility (18). What is demanded of scholars at this moment, Hulsether argues, is a "practice of resisting processes of reification and logics of appropriation in every instance, at every turn" (186). In our current conjuncture, the limits of critique are overstated; "critical negativity" is urgently needed (186).

To this end, the reader is first confronted with the ends of capitalist humanitarian projects in a preface that braids together the story of UNITE-HERE Local 33's graduate teachers' strike on the campus of Yale and the pre-mature death by suicide of Mark, Hulsether's brother, who worked at a "socially responsible" business that, by its very existence she writes, "colluded in the murder of [her] brother, times a million others names [we] do not know" (18). Mark's story and Local 33's struggle haunt throughout, animating the book's interludes, refusing to let a glimmer of possibility emerge from the seductive narratives of capitalist humanitarian projects, and rebuking the reader's desire for a glimmer of hope where there is none. "What is closure when the death is part of a bigger story, a

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wound that keeps bleeding?” Hulsether asks (21). There is no resolution in *Capitalist Humanitarianism*.

*Capitalist Humanitarianism* brings the insight of scholars from Marxist cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, to connect religion to existing structures of power to critique ideology and aims to demonstrate “how a

more developed vocabulary around religion can be a jetpack for the task of ideology critique” (7). Inspired by Hulsether’s unflinching scholarship, this Symposium brings together diverse scholars of religion, capitalism, and social movements for a wide-ranging discussion on *Capitalist Humanitarianism* and study of religion amidst the ruins of capitalism.