

Symposium: Lucia Hulsether's *Capitalist Humanitarianism*

If It is Not Nothing, What is It?

CAPITALIST HUMANITARIANISM By Lucia Hulsether.
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As I read Lucia Hulsether's *Capitalist Humanitarianism*, Cedric Robinson's haunting words at the end of *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* came to mind often. "If we are to survive," Robinson concluded, "we must take nothing that is dead and choose wisely from among the dying" (2000 [1983], 316). *Black Marxism* showed, in part, how some forms of opposition to the capitalist world system emerged as more in step with than in contradiction to what they were supposed to overthrow. Yet, at the time of his writing, Robinson saw that the "charades of neocolonialism and race relations [had] worn thin" (318) and that the mechanisms of racial capitalism were deteriorating from the force of insurgent opposition and under the weight of accumulated contradictions, perhaps marking the end of one world and the possibility of another. But Robinson promised no future; there were no guarantees—"if we are to survive," he conjectured. Whatever possibility he sensed was conditional and, his words suggest, tethered to a ruthless criticism of everything we have inherited, including where and to whom we look for models of radicalism and theories of change—we must "choose wisely."

Published forty years after Robinson's classic work, *Capitalist Humanitarianism* is an indispensable account of the cultural politics of capitalism that emerged in the intervening years, which now makeup, Hulsether argues, an established "part of the background to late capitalist institutional life" (1). As it turns out, *Black Marxism* was written in the midst of a watershed moment, one that marked the rearticulation of capitalist hegemony within a new system of representation. Drawing on the archives of fair trade, ethnographies of microfinance institutions in Latin America and the United States, and personal and professional histories, Hulsether recounts the rise

of a "sweeping strategy of neoliberal capture" (53) in which "the crimes of capitalism are converted, piece by piece, into arguments [...] for the installation of a *more humane capitalism*" (30–31, emphasis in original). In other words, the worn-out charades of one era have been replaced with another: the "bullshit conceit" that free markets can facilitate transformative solidarity (xvi). Hulsether offers an uncompromising critique of the ends of capitalist humanitarian projects and a clear-eyed call to refuse the seductive charade of this dead end in a dying world.

Capitalist Humanitarianism is compelling on every page. I especially appreciate Hulsether's recovery of Stuart Hall's Marxist version of Cultural Studies as a resource for scholars of religion. After all, many of Hall's insights about ideology, race and class, hegemony, and resistance were developed by reflecting on the cultural politics of Rastafarianism. Moreover, in Hall's account, this version of Cultural Studies was explicitly tied to a socialist project, and his thinking was aimed at understanding the organization of power under advanced capitalism to clarify how we might better organize against it (Hall, 7). I share Hulsether's bewilderment about the absence of the tradition of Cultural Studies Hall represents from the study of religion.

For Hulsether, Hall helpfully insists that the political and ideological significance of religion comes from its position within a social formation. This means, Hall writes, that a religious form or practice has "no necessary political connotation" and "can potentially be transformed, so that religion can be articulated in more than one way" (143). While seemingly self-evident, Hulsether argues that the overwhelming focus on the elective affinities and strategic connections between conservative Christianity and neoliberalism has had the "secondary effect of making 'liberation theology' and 'social Christianity' into relative moral safe zones" (6). As a result, scholars of religion and capitalism have overlooked the important role played by progressive and Left-identified Christians in developing the infrastructural and ideological foundations of contemporary capitalist hegemony, namely, "capitalist humanitarianism." But the point of the book is not to ensure that Mennonites or Presbyterians steeped in liberation theology are saddled with their fair share of the blame for posterity. More important is

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the nature of what emerged with their help and despite their intentions.

Progressive Christians sought to oppose, or at the very least mitigate, the imperial reach of American capitalism on behalf of those most vulnerable to its violence by suggesting the destructive power of the market could be reversed. As Hulsether skillfully shows, this entailed refiguring the gendered and racial social relations required for commodity production and consumption as a possible “instrument of emancipation” (59) rather than an instrument of alienation and dispossession (see 56–61). Over time and in overdetermined ways, the resignification of the commodity as a reparative force would be developed further by capitalists as a common sense that doubled as a redemption narrative. Corporations, impact investors, and social entrepreneurs “successfully manage[d] contradictions” (100) by channeling critiques of capitalism and the violence they exposed into a warrant for their own more self-aware venture, especially “when pitched in comparison to a worse alternative” (30). Given this context, Hulsether asks, “What becomes of the critique of capitalism when the idiom of capitalism, and of the empires it raises, is an idiom of self-critique?” (41).

It is for this reason that Hulsether commits herself to “the task of ideology critique” (7). This means that the book takes on, in her words, “a more negative, sometimes apophatic, pitch” than many readers will likely be comfortable with (18), an unrelenting pessimism of the intellect that capitalist humanitarians cannot easily make their own. Of course, the narrative choice is not equivalent to a “disavowal of possibility in struggle” (17). Indeed, Hulsether alerts readers at the end of the introduction that one must, in part, read her book as a parable for those with ears to hear: “When I say there is no way out, this is another way of saying: begin” (18).

But where does one begin? I am in full agreement that it is a “straw impasse” to portray “uncompromising critique” as incompatible with or as a barrier to a “commitment to transformative worldmaking” (10). Like Hulsether, I think these are “not serious criticisms” (186). However, whereas Hulsether is “tempted to shut down the question of alternatives” (185), I want to suggest that her book invites scholars of religion to make the question of alternatives a vital problem for the field.

Hulsether frames her “expository decision” to “perform a commitment to negativity” as a response to capitalist humanitarianism’s capacity to incorporate certain forms of critique (17). Yet, the decision also betrays a crisis of representation. Hulsether inveighs against the “many treatments” of religion that fall into a “bifocal framework in which religion looks in one instance like governing normativity and in another instance like a revolutionary, very often racialized, transgression or evasion of those norms.” Both, she writes, risk “abstracting religion from historical-material processes” (7–8). But in “trip[ping] over the expectation” (17) to address the question of alternatives, Hulsether suggests that to broach the question at

all amounts to trafficking in one idiom over and against the other. In doing so, Hulsether sometimes presents the problem to the reader within the bifocal terms she wants to trouble: “If a writer celebrates alternative ways of being and knowing, can this gesture spark dreams of a world otherwise, and when is it one more way of casting a carceral searchlight on what had tried to remain undetected?” (11). My own oblique response is to ask another question: is celebration the only approach to the question of writing alternatives?

The obvious answer to my question is “no,” but the way Hulsether narrates the path she did not take helps diagnose why it is so hard to resist the bifocal framework she identifies. For example, on an excursion in the field with the microfinance organization she shadowed, Hulsether witnessed a client refuse a request to be represented in a marketing campaign by the company (134–142). “Inclined to imagine life otherwise,” Hulsether confesses, “[she is] tempted to elaborate the weaver’s response as a *revolutionary break* in script” (140, emphasis mine). Tempted by what, she does not say, but I have certainly felt the weight of such expectations with my own work on the avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra—from job markets, publishing trends, grant-making bodies, and more. But maybe not every cultural idiom or minor gesture of refusal needs to be represented as the aesthetic and anarchic alternative to the disenchanted (Protestant) secular power of modern Western civilization and its subject, “Man.” As the Black Studies scholar Katherine McKittrick helpfully puts it, the metaphors that have become the standard for this mode of writing—fugitivity, maronage, underground—flatten the analytic significance of alternative modes of life into a mere emblem of the otherwise and obscure lessons that might be learned from struggle, at times reducing the work of liberation “to metaphor, analogy, trope, and symbol” (10). “Often (not always!),” writes McKittrick, “these metaphors are delinked [...] from the material and intellectual conditions that incited each *different* form of flight” (2021, 11, emphasis in original). Asking scholars to “reckon with [the] materiality of metaphor” (11), she writes in a footnote that “[w]e cannot drop blackness [or any evasion of disciplinary norms] into the realm of motif, and depart, disguising the difficult and complicated and extraliterary worlds that animate and are relational to black life” (11n.30). Hulsether does not quite render the problem this way—she is more concerned with the way such motifs are now easily scripted as an outcome of a self-critical capitalism. But if, for Hulsether, declaring “there is no way out” is “another way of saying” we need to refuse dead ends and “begin” anew, she has also helped draw attention to the need for more sustained work on the translation.

Of course, Hall is helpful here, too, as, for him, ideological critique needs to be accompanied by an attempt to “locate the possibility for ideological struggle” (152). Thinking about the space for intervention created by particular cultural forms like a religious tradition or practice “is not a question

of simply celebrating that cultural formation” (188), for Hall, but rather entails an effort to “recognize the strength and weaknesses of those forms” and, thus, to be “involved in the process of strengthening and deepening the oppositional elements of already existing cultural forms” instead of asking people to abandon them (189). This would mean approaching the question of alternatives as a process rather than event (e.g., “a revolutionary break in the script”) that, when it comes to religion, may be necessary for historical reasons, but never sufficient on their own (189–190). It would mean struggling to clarify how it is people might better “tune themselves toward [the] rhythms and signs” of alternatives, which Hulsether asks of her readers, but which is no easy task (2023, 18).

To be clear: this is not really a criticism of *Capitalist Humanitarianism* or the critical negativity Hulsether deploys. My questions are not about why the author did not write a different book. It is an utterly necessary work of criticism that ought to haunt the field for the foreseeable future. *Capitalist Humanitarianism* is a model for how religious studies might matter beyond our institutional walls and a compass for choosing wisely from among the dead and dying in these times. Instead, my response is an attempt to amplify a question the book implicitly raises but for the reasons the author outlines does not address directly. On my read, the book should be taken up as a challenge to those like myself who choose to write about life amidst the ruins to be more precise and exacting in our scholarship. At the end of chapter three, Hulsether concludes

that the accidental escape from the pull of microfinance by a church body was “not redemption.” But, she continues, “I would want to tell them, it is also not nothing” (101). I suppose this has been an extended way of posing the question I raised at the panel for which these words were first written. If it is not redemption but not nothing, what then is it? Answering this question “is perhaps not the most glamorous political work,” Hall wrote about this kind of analysis, “but it is the work we need to do” (2016, 206). That space between redemption and not nothing seems like a good place to begin considering the question of alternatives.

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