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## Book Review

# Capitalism and Christianity, American style

William E. Connolly

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How may one explain the vehemence, organization and effectiveness of the American right? How may one explain the dominance of its ideas in public consciousness and the media, its success in appointing individuals to key institutional offices and its campaigns to vilify any opponents or activists on the left? Economic self-interest is insufficient to explain the sense of mission that is more of a vocation than a defence of vested interests. The conjunction of capitalism and Christianity may offer a possible explanation.

William Connolly proposes an alternative political analysis of capitalism to the mechanism of the self-regulating market, the dominance of human agency or the effects of a mode of production: political forces resonate in the interstices between the natural world, institutions and individuals, and these resonances crystallize in an ethos or shared spirituality. Every institutional practice has an ethos of some sort embedded in its institutions, and a shared ethos can cut across divisions of identity based on race, class, gender, creed, education or income level. Then brands of capitalism, whether laissez-faire, fascist, social democratic or neo-liberal, may be distinguished by their ethos. Although they all share the axiomatic of the priority of private profit, a significant role for pricing mechanisms, the contract form of labour and the primacy of the commodity form, the ethos or spirituality impregnated into these practices is drawn from the intersections between market practices and religious institutions, from the habit-forming mechanisms of family, school and TV, and orientations to past and future expressed in underlying images of God, nature, culture and time. It finds expression in state policies, media life, movies, sermons, modes of advertising, consumption habits, and work and family life.

Connolly characterizes the dominant contemporary American spirituality as the ‘evangelical-capitalist’ resonance machine. This is a spiritual disposition, an ‘abstract will to dismiss other constituencies and disdain collective responsibility to the future’, and it might be installed in any of the micro-dimensions of political life such as affect, emotion, habit or posture. It is not that the religious or the economic acts as a cause or determinant of the other, or that they are identified. Instead, there is a resonance between their respective sensibilities



that infiltrates the logic of perception and inflects understanding of economic interests, especially as both the evangelical expectation of the Second Coming and the capitalist expectation of profit are orientations of faith towards the future. Beneath explicit religious commitment or economic interests, Connolly draws on Nietzsche to diagnose a fundamental spiritual alternative between generosity and openness to plurality on the one hand, and *ressentiment* expressed in a sense of entitlement and a punitive orientation towards constituencies and interests on the other. The evangelical commitment to a coming judgement and the capitalist commitment to expanding corporate power at the expense of public and social welfare are inspired by a common resentment against the finitude of life and mortality. This resentment is fuelled by the lived contrast between the images of wealth, power and abundance portrayed through the media and the daily struggle to make ends meet at an individual level, or the failure of America to realize the dominance it purports to possess at a global level. A key effect of this resonance is the politics of individual aspiration, or the theological view that entrepreneurial activity is the one worldly activity endowed with divine providence. Connolly gives particular emphasis to the role of the white male working class in this: omitted from the progressive political movements of the 1960s onwards that concentrated on race, gender and class, its many resentments can be incorporated by right-wing Christianity. Men are characterized in evangelical literature as vulnerable, persecuted warriors who must receive deference and compensation for sacrificing their nature for the ends of civilization and family life. Individual aspiration through economic gambles becomes the only means through which such men can express their competitive nature and aspire to identification with men of prowess and privilege. Hence the movement to redistribute wealth and income upwards, to neglect racial inequality and reduce women's rights, to escalate global warming and pollution, to reduce social supports for the needy and to wage external wars is ultimately driven by the spirituality of resentment that resonates between evangelical Christianity and corporate politics.

One can only applaud Connolly's efforts to map the spiritual terrain of his culture, its affinities and dynamisms, and to emphasize this as a neglected area of political analysis. Yet one may question the precision of his analytic categories. Certainly, spiritual sensibilities, economic presumptions and state priorities may slide and blend into one another. Nevertheless, there is a danger when isolating a single typology of spiritual sensibilities – generosity or resentment invested in a commitment to this-worldly or other-worldly redemption – that categories of psychology and theology may be fused without giving a full account of the ethos of economic or political institutions as such. For if there are spiritual sensibilities embedded in economic institutions and state policies, then these may be specific to these localities without needing to be drawn from psychological or religious categories – and



Connolly acknowledges these in describing capitalism as a faith in the future, and the role of the state in supporting the legal–political–banking–civil processes through which capital and property are generated. Certainly, they may resonate with religious sensibilities, but the underlying issue is about how logics of perception are produced and reproduced, and the interaction here between the structures of everyday life and cosmic images of redemption. American evangelicalism requires as much explanation as American capitalism.

This has implications for the tragic counter-vision proposed by Connolly to abolish resentment and provide a shared ethos for the democratic and pluralist left. For, leaving aside the extraordinary cultural success of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine and its dominance of politics and the media, the question remains as to whether such a vision can effectively resonate with the spirituality embedded within existing economic and political practices. Is it possible to return to a social democratic capitalism, now inflected by pluralism and environmentalism, or has the economic infrastructure been modified so that it can no longer support such an ethos? To what extent is each brand of capitalism an assemblage of cultural practices with an economic axiomatic, or to what extent does the architecture of capitalism determine which cultural practices are compatible with it?

Nevertheless, leaving such quibbles aside, this is a thoughtful, daring and inventive book that repays a careful reading. Connolly has succeeded in combining Weberian and Deleuzean insights into the nature of contemporary American capitalism in an extraordinarily insightful and accessible way.

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