

HOLLY RANDELL-MOON

how to disassemble a  
**christian-  
 capitalist machine**

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In his keynote address for the 2007 Cultural Studies Now conference, Stuart Hall outlined the urgent political issues that cultural studies ought to be engaged with. Reflecting on the ways racial stereotypes of criminality portrayed in the media had spurred him and others to produce research marked by an investment in challenging the politics of representation, Hall argued that cultural studies' next challenge was to explain why an Islamic fundamentalist movement has so far constituted the only significant opposition to neoliberal capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Religion as an everyday cultural practice and its implication in the politics of representation have not featured heavily in the canonical works of cultural studies scholars. Hall's comments raise questions about whether cultural studies is theoretically and methodologically equipped to evaluate the contemporary imbrications of religion with economic and political culture. These disciplinary concerns formed a backdrop to my reading of William Connolly's *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Written primarily from a political science perspective, Connolly's identifications of the spiritual and religious dimensions that dominate economic discourse in the United States provides an insightful and rigorous study on topics that will be (and should be, according to Hall) of interest to cultural studies researchers.

*Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* covers ground that Connolly has previously written about in earlier works such as *Pluralism, Why I am Not a Secularist* and *The Politicized Economy* (written with Michael Best).<sup>2</sup> The specific focus of each of these works—how to cultivate democratic pluralism, the problems

with attempting to separate the religious from the secular, and the political effects of economic discourse, respectively—are brought together in *Capitalism and Christianity*. Connolly's thesis is that a state-capital-Christian assemblage dominates political and economic life in the United States. This assemblage is made up of a providential Christianity that corresponds, or 'resonates', with a 'cowboy capitalism' unconcerned with the adverse environmental effects and economic inequality produced by imperatives to maximise wealth and generate profitability. (7) The resonance between a providential Christianity and cowboy capitalism finds expression in political and media representations of the market as an autonomous and self-regulating force that secures a 'benign connection between capitalism and human well-being over the long term' (140)—much like the ways an omniscient and providential Christian God is seen to affect the world.

The 'American Style' qualifier to the title reflects Connolly's belief that the state-capital-Christian assemblage in the United States operates according to specific cultural and historical parameters, but nevertheless, adversely affects the rest of the world. While he notes that 'there is a resurgence of public Christianity in eastern European states' (28), it is a shame political contexts in Australia and New Zealand are not mentioned. The Christian-right-conservative nexus under the Howard government (1996–2007) pre-dated some of the trends Connolly is describing in the United States and would serve as a useful political comparison.<sup>3</sup> Connolly does utilise a diverse range of scholars though, including Gilles Deleuze, Max Weber and

William James, to make the case that capitalism and Christianity are far more volatile, diverse and contingent than scholars, media commentators and politicians on the right or left will acknowledge. (100) Teasing out the volatility, and hence flexibility, of both capitalism and Christianity is what makes it possible to reorient patterns of consumption and spiritual engagement with political life in ways that will reduce economic inequality, religious conflict and climate change.

Starting with an overview of Max Weber's foundational *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,<sup>4</sup> Connolly examines the Christian ideas and practices through which capitalism has been historically 'assembled' and created. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari an understanding of capitalism as an axiomatic comprised of different sets 'of elements knotted together' (23), Connolly's aim is to show the historical and cultural contingency of capitalism. Viewing capitalism in this way has a number of important conceptual and political effects. Firstly, treating 'capitalism either as an autonomous system or as a mode of production that determines its own superstructure' (9) removes it from any historical context and obscures capitalism's cultural and political connections to religion, and more specifically, Christianity. As a corollary, the separation of religion from politics in much social science and economic research 'has led academic liberals and radicals alike to ignore for too long developments on the state-capital-Christian right that they might otherwise address'. (35) Secondly, by showing the volatility of capitalism to historical and political change, Connolly

is able to challenge politicians, journalists and economists who view the market and capitalist practices as self-regulating and immune from social and cultural instability. This point is particularly relevant for Connolly's suggestions later on in the book for reorienting the way capitalism functions.

Having explored the volatility of capitalism, Connolly proceeds to analyse 'the evangelical supplement' to American capitalism. This supplement works to justify the economic marginalisation of some constituencies by shifting the responsibility for inequality onto minority constituencies rather than the system that produced them. 'The radical Christian right' then 'compensate a series of class resentments and injustices . . . by promising solace in the church and the family'. (34) This strategy is also underpinned by prioritising economic policies seen to benefit white heterosexual men, a constituency purportedly neglected or disadvantaged by feminist, civil rights and gay social movements. An appraisal of the ways economically vulnerable working- or middle-class white constituencies are encouraged to displace their resentment onto other constituencies marginalised by neoliberal policies is similar to Ghassan Hage's work in *Against Paranoid Nationalism*.<sup>5</sup> Connolly's arguments lose some of their critical purchase when he suggests that scholars, activists and journalists on the left have partially created this political problem by not including working- or middle-class white men in their activism. (30) Placing 'blame' onto particular social movements for failing to make certain constituencies 'welcome', as opposed to critiquing the broader structural environment

in which they operate, has a similar logic to the explanations offered by the right, which Connolly critiques.

A more interesting and critically innovative avenue of Connolly's analysis is his identification of 'the evangelical capitalist resonance machine' at work in American economic and political life. This machine is created when a diverse group of people, both religious and secular, 'are drawn together despite creedal differences, because of affinities or complementarities of spirituality'. (40) Those who adhere to a spirituality where God is providential and omniscient are much more likely to view 'cowboy capitalism' favourably. Cowboy capitalism's stress on the market as an autonomous and creative force will resonate and reinforce the former's existential beliefs about how life and the world function. While these adherents find a positive affirmation of their faith in cowboy capitalism, this spiritual affirmation also cultivates an ethos of resentment or anger towards others (particularly those of different faiths) when the market fails to deliver upward mobility or economic improvement. (52) Constituencies who affirm their faith through cowboy capitalism are encouraged to adopt an ethos of resentment and 'extreme entitlement' by the usual suspects—conservative news sources, such as Fox, and conservative religious media, like the *Left Behind* books and film series.

The emphasis on a resonance machine means Connolly does not treat right-wing religious conservatism as a subversion of an otherwise non-religious economy or public culture. His point is that the agendas of neoliberal economists resonate with conservative Christians in

ways that are predictable but nonetheless subject to contingency and volatility. For this reason, Connolly argues it is possible to create new 'circuits of resonance' (67) and amplify different aspects of Christianity and capitalism to diminish the power of the evangelical capitalist resonance machine. He contends, 'neoliberalism is no more necessary to economic life as such than an omnipotent God is to religion as such'. (61)

In contrast to the ethos of resentment encouraged by faith in a providential God, a spiritual disposition based on 'presumptive cultural generosity' makes it less likely that constituents will resent the world or other people for having different faiths. (128) Such a disposition can be fostered by, paradoxically, adopting a tragic vision of a 'world in the making'. (130) A tragic vision that sees the world as 'neither designed for our benefit nor plastic enough to be putty in our hands' (121) eliminates the possibility of 'resenting the world for not being providential'. (142) In this sense, global ecological disasters and economic inequality are not seen as some part of a larger inevitable design or aberrations from an otherwise benign economic system. They are viewed as reversible and having an immediate effect on contemporary social life and its future well being. Connolly suggests that Christians, and those of other faiths such as Jews and Muslims, who resist 'drives to existential revenge and extreme entitlement' (62), could work together with secular constituencies who share a commitment to reducing income inequality and environmental degradation. Exploiting the plural nature of Christianity opens up more

avenues for activism for those on the left and undermines the right's insistence it speaks with one Christian voice.

In order for the kinds of cross-cultural and inter-faith constituencies that Connolly envisages to take place, a careful amount of self-reflection, humility and generosity is needed on the part of both religious and non-religious people. Provided they affirm their faith and 'its contestability in the eyes of others' (80) without resentment or anger, it is possible for those of different faiths, as well as those of no faith, to find a common ground to engage with political issues. An ethos of existential generosity is necessary in order to 'negotiate positive connections across significant creedal differences'. (80) Connolly does not position himself outside this ethical requirement. Throughout the book he affirms strong arguments and evidence for his opinions but also points out that his are not the only answers or solutions to current political, environmental and economic problems. Connolly's careful articulation of the ways in which faith can be engaged with and contested provides an antidote to those who avoid a critique of religious issues at all on the basis of not wishing to offend religious adherents. A critical methodology involving an ethos of generosity and self-reflection is not dissimilar to the disciplinary concerns and approach of cultural studies. Providing the parameters for a discussion where one's existential or religious views can be affirmed, but seen as contestable by others, could be a useful starting point for cultural studies practitioners seeking to explore religious issues with students in a classroom setting.

For some readers, one of the most contentious aspects of Connolly's analysis may be his argument that scholars ought to formulate practical solutions for reorienting capitalist practices rather than simply opposing capitalism outright. He suggests capitalism could be shifted in directions that encourage eco-egalitarian forms of consumption and capital practice. This could be achieved through a series of policies that would prioritise public health insurance and education as well as more government subsidies for public transport and renewable energy sources. (105–8) Sympathetic with academic and activist work that advocates more radical transformations of the state, Connolly is doubtful these goals will occur in the near future. There are more pressing and urgent policies that could be enacted now to help reduce income inequality and environmental damage.

Whether or not you agree with Connolly's prescriptions for bringing about economic and political change, his assessment of 'the current assemblage' that 'stymies the ability to reduce income inequality and turn back the threat posed by global warming' (13) critically brings into perspective the relationship between religion and economics in contemporary political culture. Indeed, Connolly presents his political and spiritual insights as contestable and a starting point for other scholars to take up issues of religion and economy in different political contexts. Australia and the United States have both seen the election of left-centre governments, and the sub-prime mortgage crisis amply demonstrates problems with neoliberal economic policies that scholars such as Connolly

predicted. Are there the religious, social and political conditions in place to create new resonance machines and disassemble the old one?

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1. A transcript of Hall's keynote address can be found at the website for the Centre for Cultural Studies Research, University of East London: <<http://www.uel.ac.uk/ccsr/culturalstudiesnow.htm>>; see also Stuart Hall, Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson and John Clarke (eds), *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Macmillan, London, 1978.
  2. *Pluralism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005; *Why I am not a Secularist*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999; *The Politicized Economy*, Heath, Lexington, DC, 1983.
  3. For research on the role of religion in contemporary Australian political and cultural institutions consult the work of Roland Boer and Marion Maddox.
  4. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1958.
  5. Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2003.