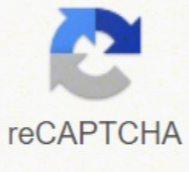




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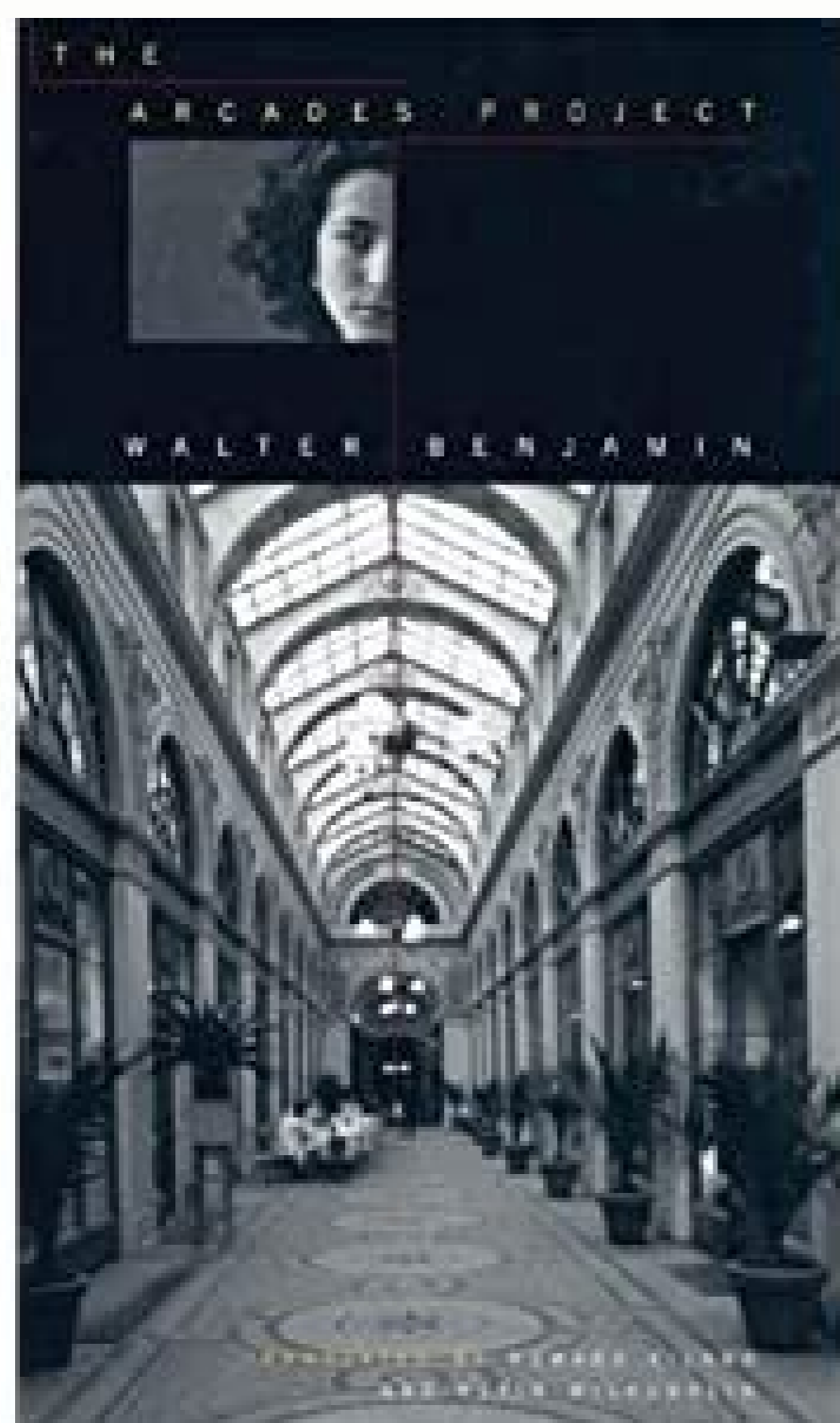
WALTER BENJAMIN

OBRAS ESCOLHIDAS

MAGIA E TÉCNICA,

ARTE E POLÍTICA

editora brasiliense



15 Capitalism as Religion

Walter Benjamin
Translated by Chad Kautzer

[Fragment 74]¹

One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. The proof of capitalism's religious structure—as not only a religiously conditioned construction, as Weber thought, but as an essentially religious phenomenon—still today misleads one to a boundless, universal pessimism. We cannot draw close the net in which we stand. A commanding view will, however, later become possible.

Three characteristics of the religious structure of capitalism are, however, recognizable at present. First, capitalism is a pure religious cult, perhaps the most extreme there ever was. Within it everything only has meaning in direct relation to the cult; it knows no special dogma, no theology. From this standpoint, utilitarianism gains its religious coloring. This concentration of the cult connects with a second characteristic of capitalism: the permanent duration of the cult. Capitalism is the celebration of the cult *sive et sine mensura*.² Here there is no "weekend," no day that would not be a holiday in the *perful* sense of exhibiting all sacred pomp—the extreme exertion of worship. Third, this is a cult that engenders blame. Capitalism is presumably the first case of a blaming, rather than a repenting cult. Herein stands this religious system in the fall of a tremendous movement. An enormous feeling of guilt not itself knowing how to repent, grasps at the cult, not in order to repent for this guilt, but to make it universal, to hammer it into consciousness and finally and above all to include God himself in this guilt, in order to finally interest him in repentance. This

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[repentance] is thus not to be expected in the cult itself, nor in the reformation of this religion—which must hold on to something certain within it—nor yet in the denial of it. In the course of this religious movement that is capitalism lies—bearing until the end, until the finally complete infusion of blame into God—the attainment of a world of despair still only hoped for. Therein lies the historical enormity of capitalism: religion is no longer the reform of being, but rather its obliteration. From this expansion of despair in the religious state of the world, healing is expected. God's transcendence has fallen, but he is not dead. He is drawn into the fate of man. This passage of "planetary man" [Planeten Mensch] through the house of despair is, in the absolute loneliness of his path, the rite Nietzsche describes. This man is the *Übermensch*, the first who knowingly begins to realize the capitalist religion. The fourth characteristic [of the religious structure of capitalism] is that its God must become concealed and may only be spoken of in the zenith of his culpability. The cult becomes celebrated before an immature deity, [while] every image, every idea of it injures the secret of its maturity.

Freudian theory also belongs to the priestly rule of this cult. It is thoroughly capitalistic in thought. The repressed, the sinful imagination, is, at bottom, still an illuminating analogy to capital—to which the hell of the unconscious pays interest.

This type of capital, religious thinking magnificently reconciles itself in Nietzsche's philosophy. The thought of the *Übermensch* loses the apocalyptic "key" not by changing its ways, atonement, purification, [or] penitence, but in the apparently continuous, but in the end, rapturing, discontinuous intensification. That is why intensification and evolution are incompatible in the sense of "non facti subum."³ The *Übermensch* is the one who without changing, arrived, who streaked through the heavens—historical man.

Nietzsche prejudged [prechoed] that [in] this breaking open of the heavens through increased humanization [Menschhaftigkeit], the religious (also for Nietzsche) blame is and remains. And similarly [with] Marx: the non-inverting [nicht umkehrbare] capitalism becomes socialism with interest and compound interest, which [are the] functions of blame (note the demonic ambiguity of this concept).⁴

Capitalism is a purely cultic relation, without dogma. Capitalism itself de-

Overcoming of capitalism through journeying [Wanderung]. Unger *Politik und Metaphysik* 544⁵

Fuchs: *Struktur der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft* n.ä. [?]⁶

Max Weber: *Ges. Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* 2 Bd. 1919/20⁷

Ernst Troeltsch: *Die Soziallehren der chr. Kirchen und Gruppen* [Ges. W. I. 1912]⁸

See above all the Schatzbergman bibliography under II.

Landauer: *Aufbau zum Sozialismus* p.144⁹

The worries a mental illness, which suits the capitalist epoch. Spiritual (not material) hopelessness in poverty, vagabondism-begging-monasticism. A condition that is as hopeless it is culpable [verschuldend]. The "worries" are the index of this guilty conscience of hopelessness. "Worries" originating in the fear of hopelessness that is community-based, not individual-material.

Christianity in the time of the Reformation did not encourage the emergence of capitalism, but rather changed itself into capitalism.

Methodologically [sic] would be [productive] to first examine what associations money has adopted with myth in the course of history—until it could draw from Christianity enough mythical elements in order to constitute its own myth.

Wiegand¹⁰/Theorem of good works/The salary that is owed to the priest. Photo as God of the rich.

Adams Müller: *Reisen über die Berghausen* 1826 556ff.

Connection of the dogma of the nature of knowledge—which, in its quality of resolving [auflösend], is, to us, at the same time a liberating and killing—with capitalism. The end result is a liberating and ruining [erlösende] knowledge.

It contributes to the knowledge of capitalism as a religion to imagine that the original paganism certainly and most positively grasped religion not as a "higher" "moral" interest, but as the most immediately practical—that it had with other words been aware of its "ideal" or "transcendent" nature, just as today's capitalism is, but saw in the irreligious or individual of different faith an infallible member of its community, in precisely the same sense the modern bourgeoisie [saw] its non-earning members [nicht erwerbendes Angehörigen].

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