

Post-Pentecostalism and the sacrifice of money: a remedy to face fragility in the contemporary capitalist world order?

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Professor Berge has presented an analysis of UCKG showing how different from other Pentecostal movements this church is. I'd like to continue his analysis focusing the relationship between this form of religious experience and the production of subjectivity (the constitution of the self) in our contemporary capitalist world. Clearly, this church faces the fragility of the subjectivity of the people who attend the church proposing “the sacrifice of money” as a technology to deal with suffering and as a remedy to treat the contemporary experience of shame. Prof. Berge stated his conclusion that, at UCKG, “the priority is to survive – to save oneself”. We believe we have the “treasure of life and faith” and we are “earthen vessels”. What can we do in our praxis to promote a lifestyle deeper in meaning than being a survivor? I would like to reflect on this through the presentation of two stories.

It was Monday. I was standing in front of a Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) temple in downtown Porto Alegre, Southern Brazil. A horror scene unfolded before my eyes: a woman in shabby clothes, probably a homeless beggar, was violently thrown out of the temple. She fell down on the pavement while a church security guard kicked her in the stomach and grabbed a plastic bottle of water from her hands. He opened it and poured out the content onto the street, throwing the empty bottle at her while she screamed and rolled on the ground in pain. Probably she had taken the bottle of water from somebody in the temple. Some people got angry watching the scene and called the police. Inside the temple about five thousand people were taking part in a so-called “Meeting (or Congress) for Businessmen”.

If the scene itself generates horror because of its unprovoked violence, cruelty and “boldness” involved, the horror increased when a woman, member of the church, approached me, vigorously defending that act of violence. She argued that *“It was a demon who tried to ruin the meeting. But he has been thrown out of the temple and will not disturb us anymore!”* To make sure that her explanation was right, she added: *“now, after this spectacle (involving the police,*

reporters and many people assembled outside the meeting), the demon is sleeping quietly.” She was referring to the fact that the beggar, assaulted a while ago, was now calm, lying still on the ground with her eyes closed.

While that was happening, I saw a beautiful woman, neatly dressed, entering the church. She was the owner of a successful bakery established on the west side of the city. I had interviewed her six months before. She told me about how her life had changed by this church. Deeply depressed, on the brink of committing suicide, she found herself deeply in debt and regularly attended Afro-Brazilian religious ceremonies. One night, when she was planning to commit suicide, she watched one of the UCKG TV programs and followed exactly what the bishop said to do. She put a glass of water on top of the TV set and, after a prayer blessing the glass of water, she drank it. For the first time after a month with very little sleep, she could finally sleep all night long. From that day on, she began attending the meetings, taking part in the "sacrifice campaigns" and now she feels happy to testify of her financial and emotional success which was a direct result of obeying all that the bishop said to do on TV.

These are powerful stories. Regarding the first one, Yvan Droz, a Swiss ethnologist, makes similar remarks describing the way the UCKG treats the poor in Kenya. He says: “beggars and tramps are excluded from the services. They must not bother the audience with their appearance or constant requests for alms (...). Nevertheless, poor people, like beggars or homeless children, are fed by the church (...). They are not abandoned. But they can’t be on their own since their proper place is outside the walls of the temple” (Droz, 2003, p. 119). Therefore, the ones who stay outside are those who can’t be mirrors for the others.

The second story serves as an example both of the fragility and the strength of what the UCKG system requires to put an end to suffering: just make a sacrifice (in fact, a “self-investment”). The successful and happy person is the one who can make an offering as sacrifice. Sacrificial offerings are the foundation on which the UCKG teachings of rituals stand. These two

stories complement each other. They remind us of an observation made by the French philosopher Deleuze (although used in another context). He drew our attention to the fact that we are responsible for the production of certain modes of existence. Deleuze states: “We are not responsible for the victims, but responsible before them”. Before the victims and before the production of certain modes of life some questions arise, such as: what can I be? What can I do? Which are our possibilities of resistance? What are our battles today? To Deleuze, the search for answers to these questions constitutes the thinking in action. Thinking as a fighting strategy, non-conformation, and remolding the earthen vessels simultaneously to remolding the world, as the apostle Paul reminds us, while stimulating us to fight for the permanent recreation of the world through new ways of thinking (Rom. 12:2).

These questions require elaborated answers and we know beforehand that there is not a unique possible answer. But we have **some perceptions** that may help us build, in a collective way, some fighting strategies against domination, against exploration, against the current forms of subjection.

To face these questions we have to come to terms with the understanding that macropolitical and micropolitical dimensions are not separable. These dimensions work simultaneously. According to Negri, macropolitical and micropolitical levels come from the premise that both are related to social collectivities. But they are related to two types of aggregations or populations. The first one is related to the extended aggregation or groups of people which are constituted through processes of integration and representation and they form a totality, a unit; for instance, institutions and established ways of living. The second one is related to "micromultiplicities" whose singularities can form "constellations" or non-homogeneous nets (Negri, 2003, p. 75). In other words, it refers to the active process which involves distinctive singularities towards a common goal to build new forms of organization.

Contemporaneous Capitalism and the “molding” of an earthen vessel.

Christianity is not the only one that discovered that human beings are earthen vessels, modeling, flexible. This plastic capacity of human being has also been discovered by contemporary capitalism, and above all, by its postfordist mode of production. But, if in Christianity the metaphor of “earthen vessel” is used to feed the hope of change and bets in our capacity of continuously and creatively remold our own lives, in capitalism, however, the capacity of molding this vessel is expropriated and captured to feed the way this current regime works.

Thinkers like Antonio Negri, Lazzarato, among others, have highlighted that, since the 70s and the 80s, capitalism is continuously refining itself. Its main driving force is really based on the capacity of creation of the human being. Lazzarato even calls the actual system “Cognitive Capitalism”. This so called Cognitive Capitalism relies in the “cooperation between brains”, mobilizing the intelligence and the desire of individuals. A very relevant example of this is the Freud theorization of Narcissism and the appropriation and application of this knowledge, by capitalism, for its own benefit. It is not by chance that, during the 80s and the 90s many studies were done about the birth of a “narcissistic culture”, without precedents in the social field. When it appropriates itself of the creative force of an individual, capitalism captures the *active forces of narcissism*, because *active forces* are the ones that push the person to creation, to the differentiation of the self. This process of capture also triggers a *reaction* movement producing certain configurations in the social field (like institutions, organizations, ways of life, etc) as an expression of the *reactive forces of narcissism*.

In order to continue with this reflexion, once these concepts are better explained, let's define what we mean by *active and reactive forces of narcissism*. In a very short way, we can characterize as *reactive forces of narcissism* those that seek only the *adaptation and conservation*

of life. These forces configure a mode of being of the “individual” type. An “individuality” is created. In others words, the individual is the starting and finishing point of self-care. In this sense, everything that 'it is' and 'it is intended to be' should fit in the space of self-concern. Dimensions such as family, country, God and society only matter to the narcissist (in the reactive mode) as means of affective, economic and personal success, self-realization or physical well-being (Costa, apud Esperandio, 2006, p. 56)¹.

The main characteristic of *active forces of narcissism* is its plasticity. Its strength goes up to the limit of its own potentiality and according to Nietzsche’s description is a force that affirms the difference, making its difference an object of joyousness and matter for the creation of a singular being. A “singularity” is created. It is important to stress, however, that the forces can not be defined by themselves, unless when they are relating to other forces, in the encounter of bodies, in the affection of senses and in the sensibility that happens in these encounters. Only in the encounters the differentiation of forces becomes possible. If in these encounters there is openness to the other and sensibility to shelter and to affirm the difference certainly the result will be creation and enrichment of the subjectivities which are involved in the process.

But the problem is that capitalism takes advantage of the creative potentiality of individuals and, in this way, reverts the “classic” model of production. In the fordist model the sequence was production-market-consumer, the fabrication of desire was the core of capitalism. Today, in postfordism, it is necessary, first of all, to create the world and the subject where this product will exist: the fabrication of the world and of the desire precedes production. Lazzarato, paraphrasing Marx, states: “capitalism is not a way of production, but a production of worlds” (Lazzarato, 2006, p. 100). It is not a coincidence that, at least, 50% of a product’s cost is invested

¹ Costa does not work with the concept of *reactive forces of narcissism*. This quote is taken from a context where he describes the narcissistic subjectivation mode of our times. But, in my point of view, it describes very well the idea of what I develop here as *reactive forces of narcissism*.

in marketing, publicity and design, according to Lazzarato.

Two aspects are important to stress in relation to the model of postfordist production. Both are related to the capture of the *forces of narcissism* towards the production of a *flexible subjectivity*. In one hand, flexible subjectivity becomes necessary to meet the new demands of capitalism in its manner of organizing the work relations. In the other hand, flexibilization is essential to manage the speed that we have to adapt ourselves to the new and incessant universes created by capitalism. It is important for us to focus the question of plasticity of subjectivity in relation to the new spheres of market created by capitalism.

The new markets – and along with them, the new forms of life – are disposable in a short period of time, always replaced by the always new markets to be consumed, demanding all the time a new reconfiguration of subjectivity. It is the exploitation of the frail and modeling earthen vessels. Our resistances to the dominant forms of life and the ways that we create to flee from them have been continually expropriated by capitalism. Therefore, the current regime presents, in an unstoppable way, new products, new services, new forms of life, created by marketing, publicity and design departments and broadcasted by the media that make us believe that the consumption of such models of existence are indispensable to the configuration of a subjective territory. In this sense, those who do not recognize themselves as possessors or “customers” start to believe that they are nothing, because they identify themselves with the “less” type of people: homeless, jobless, landless, shirtless, moneyless, healthplanless, healthless, etc. They suffer the humiliation and shame of an existence with no value and no dignity – that is a concrete reality to many and a threat that haunts some, reminding the possibility of someday find themselves among the “less”.

The images of world produced by capitalist market create the illusion of “paradises” on

earth. The media broadcasts the idea that it is possible to experience these paradises only by investing our energies, our desires, our imagination, etc, to make real in our existences these virtual worlds, through buying objects and services that they offer us (Rolnik, 2006, online).

A flexible subjectivity is exposed to a process of identification with these images of the world broadcasted by the media and the mass culture that fight for the instauration of values that will direct the choices of the customers (Lazzarato, 2006, pgs 101-102). In this sense, the proliferation of these images spreads some imperatives lived in a paradoxical way: as an order to be obeyed and a way of obtaining pleasure. For example: “be successfull!”, “be happy!”, “be healthy!”, and, above all: “be flexible!”. These imperatives pave the way, give the map of happiness and point the way of living (how to eat, to dress, to live, to love), the manner of obtaining success (permanent education, profitable work, individual performance able to beat the competitors, etc) the way to be healthy (measures of the ideal body ², the fitness, the diets and consumption of diet/light products), etc. These imperatives work as games of seduction and capture of desire, justly in the *narcissism forces* dimension. The desire turns towards the world of products and profit, and it is seduced by offerings of consumption of the objects and consumption of worlds which transmit the promise of pleasure and the illusion of “belonging”. New sufferings are attached in these worlds that promise happiness, but they found masked under the postfordist society imperatives’ which demands an individual search for success, prosperity and a perfect healthy and happy body. The effects of producing these ideals, as well as the offerings to “correct” or “increase” such images, generate pathologies such as: depression, anxiety, anorexia, bulimia, different compulsions (for food, for buying things, etc), panic disorders, drug addictions, etc.

² The book organized by Mirian GOLDENBERG, *Nu e Vestido*, shows that, in 2001, approximately 400,000 plastic surgeries were done in Brazil.

The other also begins to be seen as an object of consumption from the instrumentalization of the self and of its peers as the adequate object for gratification and pleasure. These are the *reactive forces of narcissism* in full swing. Therefore, in a society where everything and everybody become, indistinctly, objects of consumption, “anything goes” in the search for individual satisfaction, that starts to be taken, therefore, as a right. The increasing of spontaneous violence and a process of vulgarization of life (our own life and the other’s) can be well noticed. Without referential principles for moral choices, the demand for personal satisfaction here-and-now has become, in general, the criterion that drives the choices and the composition of forces. The result is the configuration of a lifestyle where the subject feels weakened, depressed, exposed, fragile, seeking in the practice of consumption the fulfilling of its dependency of acknowledgement of the other. Nowadays, the practice of self care is detached from the care for the other. This fact points out to a lifestyle centered in itself, based, therefore, on reactive forces of narcissism.

The stage is set for the UCKG to enter with its religious proposal that reaffirms the idea of paradise on earth already sold by contemporary capitalism, and with a (supernatural) solution to those that are excluded from such paradise: just make a sacrifice!

The base of religious experience of Universal Church: the sacrifice as the “technology of self”

The commercial-invitation of UCKG urges the individual to participate in the “happiness meetings”. In different languages, its *slogan* throughout the world is: “stop suffering”. It promises to end “depression, panic attacks, headaches, anxiety, unemployment, loneliness, alcoholism, drug addiction, family problems, debts and serious illnesses, such as cancer and the HIV virus”. Therefore, we can see that the UCKG attention is turned to the well-being and the happiness of the individual. The church shelters, daily, in its temples, hundreds of people who

suffer, promoting meetings that happen around 5 times a day, depending on the country. In this religious experience the emphasis is not on the construction of a meaning for life. So, in the dominant mode of subjectivation, the meaning of life is already stated: to be happy. People seek efficient strategies and technologies for the promotion of everything that can be put under the umbrella of an idea of happiness. Happiness is seen as a synonymous of joy. Considering this meaning, the bigger, the faster and the most constant pleasure becomes, bigger will be the illusion of happiness. Therefore, the person puts its energies in the search for its own happiness/joy with no time to worry with something else besides the “self”, the fulfilling of the biological needs for pleasure. The *reactive forces of narcissism* are predominant here. The religiosity promoted by UCKG seeks to make it possible for the individual in this immediate experience of joy. The focus of this religious experience is not the *transformation of the world*, but to make possible for the individual to *enjoy the world*. The sacrifice at the UCKG constitutes itself, therefore, as a *technology of self* that makes possible to reach this goal.

According to Foucault, *technologies* are strategies used to some particular type of domination. There are technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power and technologies of self. These latter “permit individuals to effect by their own or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault, 1996, pg 48).

Freud already observed that when the body suffers, the subject turns narcissistically to itself. The sufferings treated by UCKG affect directly the subjectivity in the dimension of the *forces of narcissism*. Those kinds of sufferings express feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, retraction, apathy, fear of taking risks and point to the fact of that all these sensations can be put under the umbrella of the notion of *shame*. Shame is related to the egoic function and can be one

of the most profound expression of *reactive forces of narcissism*. In this sense, the religious experience promoted by UCKG captures the desire of independency and autonomy of individual and treats the feeling of shame through the *technology of sacrifice*. Making a sacrifice of money the individual deals with its shame, with its desire of being affirmed in its grandiosity, in its power. The will to power is, then, captured in a way that the desire is reduced to ambition for profit, desire of possession, desire for small pleasures or even the supply of the basic needs of life. An exchange is made with the divine through the sacrifice of money. What they seek is to have “God as an ally and a partner”, as Bishop Macedo says. In this mode of religiosity the subjectivity is reaffirmed in its individual dimension, crushing it in the *undifferentiated mass* of people that gather in the same place, with the same goal, but closed to each other. The only common point among them is the desire of ending the fragility and discontentment, using their own biography in the search of solutions to socially produced sufferings. The technique of sacrifice makes impossible for the subject to construct, in its own vulnerabilities, something new that surpasses the level of survival, because the movements which would favor the construction of *common* through cooperation are blocked. Through the technology of sacrifice, the desire of life transformation is captured and replaced by the promise of heaven on earth. Nevertheless, the *common* does not carry any promises. On the contrary, it is a premise to the construction of other ways of life (Virno, 2007, online). Faith is transformed into a certainty of reward of an investment made in its own self and it is emptied of its power of creating another mode of being and living. Therefore, it bars a creation process in *common* that could be done by the *multitude*. We do not understand *multitude* as the *undifferentiated mass of individuals* – what happens in the UCKG meetings. *Multitude* is not a meeting of identities or individualities, nor exaltation of difference, but “a group of cooperating *singularities* that present themselves as a net, a *network*, a group that defines the singularities in its relations with each other” (Negri, 2005, online). That is why the issue of “common” is closely related to the notion of *multitude and the active forces of*

narcissism. Contrary to the *mass*, that unites homogeneous individualities, the idea of *multitude* shelters the acknowledgment that behind the identities and differences, ‘common ground’ can exist among the singularities, something that can be worked in cooperation to the creative construction of another way of being and of living.

The mode of religiosity based on the promotion of a well-being that is reached in the individual dimension, detaching the care for oneself from the care for the other, is, in my opinion, a religiosity based on the *reactive forces of narcissism*. It promotes the *conservation* and *reproduction* of a mode of existence focused on the pleasure and happiness that come from the profit that can be reached in the exchanges. Life can even get better when shame starts to be, partially, replaced by courage, arrogance of being able to make high financial donations (as the sacrifice offering). But the reactive logic remains the same, because there is not an acknowledgment of the difference (between God and the human being) and receiving of grace: to accept that one is accepted by the divine. There is an attempt to pay the debt of the received grace from Christ’s sacrifice through making a sacrifice of money. In the trading world this is the mode of religiosity that makes sense. But in the Christian hermeneutics of grace this practice is strange to God.

It is a fact that many have found at the UCKG relief for the suffering of an ashamed subjectivity. But religiosities which sustain a reactive logic do not rescue the dimension of *singularity*, of differentiation of self by *active forces of narcissism*. They only help in the construction of defenses for the individuality to move with more pleasure, with more gratifying, with more “happiness”.

Pastoral counseling has before itself the challenge to contribute, with its practice, to the creation of worlds that affirm life. In which way is it possible to contemplate both the dimensions

of *singularity* and of the *multitude*? How can we create new forms of producing the labor of *multitude*, so that the *common* that unites us here, today, continues its creation process of other ways of living that escape the imprisonment produced by the current regime? We are earthen vessels and we have a treasure within us. What can our creation force do to face the challenge of producing life beyond survival? How should we make life free from these new impasses?

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