Some Half-Baked Speculations on Benjamin, Privacy, and Fascism

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“Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.”

There is a great deal of recent controversy over the word “freedom.” So far, we have not arrived at the point where George Orwell’s second slogan of the party (Freedom is Slavery) has been officially adopted. Nor do I see this happening any time soon as I am confident that the English word “slavery” is unrecoverable from a public relations point of view. But it should be noted that “War is Peace” has been literally proclaimed by the current President of the free world and while “Ignorance is Strength” has not caught on in so many words, we are repeatedly reminded of the moral weakness of the effeminate and overeducated class. However, for the time being, the closest official bastardization is the more circumspect “Freedom isn’t Free.” In theory, this is a slogan that could be echoed by sentiments across the political spectrum, even harkening back to a Kennedy-esque call for public service and sacrifice. However, no such call for active public participation has been forthcoming. Indeed, “Freedom isn’t Free” is a call to a kind of civic passivity, a restoration of wealth to the propertied classes coupled with a recognition that collective security depends upon giving up civil rights and liberties in favor of the superior wisdom of a benevolent State. This slogan makes sense if and only if American hegemony is synonymous with freedom and that the price of this freedom is the absolute and uncritical identification with the aims of collective national power.

Political moments are transient and ephemeral, however, and it is not clear how long this contemporary situation will last. As I write this essay, there may be some signs that an increasing number of people are uncomfortable with state invasions of their privacy. There may be hope yet for old-fashioned liberalism in which the distortions of political life can be met with a heavy dose of realism (to expose lies) and individual autonomy (to think for oneself). Consequently, it may seem like Walter Benjamin, with his surrealism, unapologetic collectivism, and his critique of privacy as a hopelessly bourgeois notion in league with “outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery” could not be any less helpful. In light of the Patriot Act’s extension of surveillance, it would appear odd to embrace the moral exhibitionism Benjamin described in his essay “On Surrealism,” in which he favorably recalled an encounter with Tibetan monks in Moscow who left their doors perpetually ajar: “To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need.”

But Benjamin may provide some insights that have been otherwise overlooked in the debate between security and privacy. To the extent that recovering liberal ideals depends upon a (possibly temporary) abatement of fear and shows little signs of an increased concern for the public good, it leaves

uncriticized the persistent tie between property and privacy that continues to haunt the liberal conception of freedom. What may be less obvious is that there is an unstated consensus on what freedom means in popular political discourse, namely, freedom from state encroachment. On the Right, this translates into a concern for the protection of free and unregulated markets coupled with aggressive state regulation of human bodies. The justification for the state’s seemingly incongruously large role in the bedroom rests on the belief that moral and sexual chaos in which the virtue of free citizens is overpowered by a decadent social order. Rather than framed as state encroachment, the Right’s moral regulation is justified by its “protection” of threatened values. This picture is inverted on the Left, which seeks to protect bodily integrity while remaining more comfortable with economic regulation. However, in the wake of the concession that the era of big government is over, the rationale behind such regulation is increasingly incoherent and politically untenable.

In some varieties of classic political theory, the state mediates between competing human interests. When no institution has a legitimate monopoly on violence, this creates a fragile existence with no guarantee of physical or economic security. Without the state, there is no meaningful protection of property or personal liberty. Among other things, this can make the relationship between sovereign powers a key concern for those whose property interests range across borders. As global markets complicate the nexus between privacy, property, security, and national sovereignty, exporting freedom becomes an increasing policy concern for the state that views its ability to secure property on a global stage as a test of its legitimacy and power. Furthermore, violence in the form of non-state actors poses a particular challenge for state sovereignty. The danger here is that, whatever the various subjective motives and intentions may be, the current vogue for nation-building ultimately mocks the public vitality and accountability of democratic institutions if the work on behalf of freedom is reducible to securing property. As Susan Buck-Morss asks: “Are we witnessing a US national security state bid to transform itself from an obsolete superpower into a global sovereign power? Such sovereignty would challenge the nation-state system by claiming the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, launching “police actions” against “criminals” throughout the globe. What, crucially, would be its relation to global capital?”

Thrown into this mix is religion. In the modern democratic state, religion is extolled as a valuable and, depending on one’s point of view, indispensable element of social life to the extent that it accepts a legitimate place in the private sphere (although the public/private line here is far from clear). On a related note, religious conviction and practice is itself often described in terms of an individual consumer choice subject to the invisible hand of a spiritual free market. While I am convinced that the market metaphor makes a great deal of descriptive sense, there is still further reflection to be done on the political consequences of such a market. Is the free market of religion a welcome mat for a new pluralism and the template for cultural diversity and vigorous personal liberty? How far does the scholarly field of Religious Studies want to go with descriptive and analytical language borrowed from markets? Is the term “market” meant as a metaphor, a classification of the status of religion under capitalism, or both? After all, markets do not merely satisfy innate consumer needs. Rather than identify and respond to a preexisting desire for a two-hundred dollar pair of sneakers, markets create and manipulate desire to convince consumers that they so desperately need such sneakers. Only in this context is it responsible to think about how “free” consumer choices are made. How might one imagine a marketplace of religions in terms of commodity fetishism? Would this leave the study of religion in an infinite regress of haloes around haloes around haloes? More productively, the market metaphor may help to account for a process of reification

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by which religions, in order to compete and survive, have been required to package themselves as discrete objects that conform to classificatory standards that identify and define religious phenomena. Furthermore, what is religious freedom in terms of free markets? Is religion a kind of private property? If so, what does privacy mean and who has access to this privacy? After all, privacy depends upon the property and means to have some inviolate space worth protecting in the first place. As Patricia J. Williams points out in her penetrating interrogation of the relationship between privacy and property, the third, fourth, and fifth amendments to the US Constitution provide a great deal more freedom to someone with a home than to someone who is homeless. Does this analysis work for the first amendment as well, particularly in light of recent Supreme Court rulings that money can merit the legal protection of speech? As Williams asks: “What does free speech or freedom itself mean, if it really has a price?”

If religion, which like speech is granted first amendment protection in the United States, is a private matter analogous to private property, what is at stake in protecting or invading it? Finally, does this analysis of religious markets take unequal distribution of capital into account? Is this freedom reducible to giving customers what they want regardless of the demands that different consumers can make?

I am by no means going to answer all of these questions in this essay nor will I find a way to have Walter Benjamin answer all of these questions for me. However, I would like to offer some half-baked speculations about the way Benjamin depicted the relationship between private property and fascism, with the hope that this may complicate assumptions that religious freedom can be ensured by making it accountable exclusively to consumer choices. For his part, Benjamin had a relatively ambivalent attitude toward the liberating potential of new markets. He was enough of a Marxist to put no stock in attempts to reverse liberalizing trends by imagining ways to resist markets or recover some sacred authority or foundation that could heal the ruptures of a fragmented modernity. Instead of hoping to hold the forces of profaning consumerism at bay, Benjamin took seriously Marx’s assertion that it was the very cultural destructiveness of global markets that promised a revolution in collective consciousness. But Benjamin was less faithful to Marx’s conviction that progress toward communism was a necessary and inevitable historical trajectory. In his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin argued that while technological transformations will indeed render bourgeois ideals obsolete, the changing substructure created a historical ambiguity in which both communism and fascism were possible outcomes. Thus, his artwork essay concluded with a description of the aesthetics of war that may resonate with those who have encountered a television in the last few years: “Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.”

**Fascism**

Understanding the place of fascism in Benjamin’s thought may help to shed some light on his attitude toward privacy and may in turn help to reflect on religious freedom under global capitalism. For Benjamin, the key difference between a communist politicization of art and a fascist aestheticization of politics involved the recovery of aura to enshrine the will of a leader over a collective mass while preserving the existing structure of property. Like communism, fascism required forms of mass cultural production that made possible a collective consciousness. Unlike communism, fascism preserved not only private property, but even more importantly, the corresponding superstructure of bourgeois ideals that Benjamin believed could serve only reactionary purposes in

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the context of mass culture. What is important to keep in mind is that the artwork essay was less a positivist history about the impact of technology on culture as much as an attempt to understand the political implications of changing perception and sensibility. Benjamin was convinced that new technology was irrevocably transforming the nature of social life as it changed the way in which human beings interacted with their physical and social environments. A sometimes overlooked point is that Benjamin did not believe that aura would necessarily vanish with new forms of technological reproducibility. Rather, the persistence of aura posed a danger to the extent that it was employed to maintain bourgeois conceptions of originality, individuality, and genius. This persistence coupled with new collective sensibilities served reactionary purposes. Indeed, the viability of fascism depended upon the maintenance and preservation of aura. As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi explains in her study of fascist aesthetics: “Benjamin noted that in the case of fascism technology, paradoxically, was not leading to the complete decline of aura and cultic values. On the contrary, he thought fascism was able to utilize the remnants of auratic symbols and their mystical authority both to keep the ‘masses’ from pursuing their own interests and to give them a means to express themselves.” It was not impossible to recover bourgeois aesthetics as much as it was impossible to recover bourgeois aesthetics without becoming reactionary.

Sober Senses

Benjamin begins his artwork essay by discussing Marx’s predictions about the fate of capitalism. According to Marx, part of capitalism’s world historical significance was that it would undermine the authority of religious institutions. As he described: “All that is sold melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.” Marx argued that the bourgeoisie performed a vital, if unwitting, world-historical task in fostering the conditions for global communism. Religion was the opiate of the masses that dulled the pain of their poverty and exploitation. The bourgeoisie’s insistence on assigning a financial value to everything left nothing sacred: “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers.” If religion was the opiate of the masses, capitalist profanation amounted to a world-historical buzz kill in which the proletariat would finally face the pain of their real material conditions. By undercutting religious illusions, the effect of global capitalism was similar to what Marx identified as the prerequisite of all criticism, in which: “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness. The call to abandon illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions. Thus, the critique of religion is the critique of vale of tears of which religion is the halo.” But stripping away the halo did not finish or accomplish the work of liberation by itself. Rather, it further implicated everyone within the material and economic conditions of social and intellectual life. As Marshall Berman explains: “Marx’s point in tearing the haloes from their heads is that nobody in bourgeois society can be so pure or safe or free. The networks and ambiguities of the market are such that everybody is caught up and entangled in them. Intellectuals must recognize the depths of their own

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9 Ibid., 53.
dependence—spiritual as well as economic dependence—on the bourgeois world they despise.”

Marx was presuming that sacrality was incommensurate with buying and selling and did not anticipate that religions could reinvent themselves as commodity forms. In his view, religion could not be uncoupled from the traditions that invested them with authority. A religion custom-designed to meet the demands of the consumer would be essentially irrelevant to what Marx was talking about except for the fact that it might further the religious drug trade. What mattered to Marx was that religion aided mass alienation by dulling the sense of material pain. Benjamin stressed not only the sensory implications of alienation, but the pervasiveness of this sensory distortion in modern life. If capitalism had not yet given way to communism and if claiming to have overcome alienation while still living under a capitalist dispensation would undercut the force of the Marxist connection between substructure and superstructure, then the moment at which "sober senses" could face the "real condition of life" had not yet arrived. To this end, any supposedly Marxist preference for "realism" was premature and failed to consider that intoxication and not sobriety best contributed to a materialist analysis of the modern present. Benjamin made a similar point in his essay “The Author as Producer,” in which he took issue with those artists and thinkers who renounced their own class position in order to identify with the proletariat. With this critique, he was not celebrating the superiority of bourgeois intellectualism as much as he was criticizing a naïve view about the realities of class. As Benjamin pointed out: “A political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem, has a counterrevolutionary function so long as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as

a producer.”

The counterrevolutionary mistake of the would-be revolutionary author was derived from an inadequate grasp of material production. Far from advancing the cause of the proletariat, attempting to depict someone else’s material conditions trivialized the pervasiveness of the substructure in disciplining both thought and sensory experience: “The intellectual mimics the external appearance of proletarian existence without being even remotely connected to the working class. He thereby seeks the illusory state of standing outside the class system.”

In other words, Benjamin’s version of Marxist materialism held that the alienated sensory body faced limits in feeling real economic and social conditions. Marx’s insistence that the superstructure mirrored the substructure implied that the material conditions of production at any historical moment conditioned how bodies perceived the world. But because this perception was alienated, there was no adequate means by which to perceive and represent this condition. Without a communist sensorium, all perception was distorted. Consequently, only by disrupting ordinary sensibility and feeling could a revolutionary consciousness develop. Benjamin found in surrealism an artistic movement that furthered this Marxist conception because surrealists were not striving for a realistic imitation of nature. Rather, they used art in order to jar, disorient, and confuse, hoping to disrupt routinized everyday experience. Most of what was familiar, self-evident, and apparently natural was at once the most important material for artistic reflection as well as the most elusive and mysterious. As Benjamin explained, surrealism offered moments of “profane illumination” that provided fleeting insights into that which was pervasive and yet most difficult for ordinary senses to perceive: “For histrionic or fanatical stress on

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the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.”¹⁴ Surrealists attempted to disrupt the self-evident and familiar in order to see ordinary things in a new way. To this end, they used shock effects that tried to make the familiar strange so that it could be viewed as if it were seen for the first time.

The surrealist project, then, attempted to create a revolutionary sensibility that contended with the intoxication of modern senses. But alienation was not limited to human contact with material objects. Private property fostered a sense of individuality that undermined the relationships between human beings. Instead of a cooperative life under communism, capitalist competition made individual acquisitiveness seem self-evident and natural. Surrealist shock effects could help to reorient relationships between human beings so as to lay the foundation for collective social and economic life. As Benjamin explained: “There is a residue. The collective is a body, too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us.”¹⁵ Technology could potentially help to organize a productive collective social life, but it did not have to. From a liberal perspective, it is not hard to find the fascist implications of a collective body disciplined by the political and factual reality of mass media imagery coupled with the technological assault on privacy in the form of wire-taps, satellite surveillance, email monitoring, and who knows what else. It is less clear what it would require to oppose this. Is the logical outcome of liberalism a kind of luddite anti-modernism? In other words, deciding to be against new technologies, like deciding to be against globalization, may be perfectly reasonable but largely irrelevant. The issue here is not that Benjamin was advocating new technologies and sensibilities as a way toward his treasured profane illumination, as if to say: “Boy, the physis of the collective body organized by technology is going to be great!” Rather, he was hoping for fleeting moments of illumination that could elucidate the process of inevitable change.

Technology

The capacity of technology to transform and reorient human sensibility had significant political consequences. If, as Benjamin argued, the collective was a body, the development of “mass media” marked a change in social experience. New media technologies did not just supplement human senses or provide greater access to information; they fundamentally transformed the relationships between human beings and their material and social environments. In light of new media technologies, the entire conceptual framework that framed the perceived tension between individual rights and collective goods was at best obsolete and at worst reactionary. Technological reproducibility made possible the mass production of individuality under which fascism flourished. Fascism, as Falasca-Zamponi points out, flourished under just such a celebration of the unique and authentic personality of the leader. For Benjamin, the tension between individual and collective had to give way to a criticism of different modes of collectivity. In this way, Benjamin saw his work as a providing an alternative to fascism:

They brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled (and at the present moment uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense. The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the

¹⁵ Ibid., 192.
purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.\(^{16}\)

Fascist aesthetics made use of creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery in service of the cult of the leader. When invested with almost supernatural and superlegal power, the leader was free to improvise, to be a man of action who eschewed the effeminate flip-flopping of democratic deliberation and indecision. If democratic institutions along with the privacy of individual citizens stood in the way of executive power and efficiency, this left the state weak and insecure. In place of this, fascism provided a feeling of collective power and security enhanced by new forms of media that manufactured a sensory overload that impressed the majesty of the state upon the collective body.

In the face of this, it would make sense to be exceedingly worried about the capacity of new media technologies. Indeed, Benjamin’s friend Adorno and his successors in the Frankfurt School would have little hope for mass media. But Benjamin saw revolutionary potential in the formation of a collective political consciousness. The reproducibility of the image was one such dimension of new media that Benjamin saw as politically productive because of the way in which it dispensed with the aauratic quality of works of art. For Benjamin, the authenticity of the original invested by material presence was an increasingly inadequate way to think about art. Rather, mass media was an avenue by which collective expression could catch up with the industrial realities of the economic substructure: “The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production.”\(^{17}\)

New technologies of photography and film participated in mass production in a way that was perfectly appropriate to a society in which so much of the material necessities of life were produced and reproduced in modern factories. In some sense, art had always been reproducible, but mechanical reproduction was something new. With the photograph, reproduction became an entirely mechanical process that did not require a human hand to draw, copy, or trace an image.

Importantly, mechanical reproduction could not reproduce the original: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.”\(^{18}\)

As the copy was distributed in new situations and contexts that the original could not reach, this necessarily devalued the value of the presence of the original work. Once mechanical reproduction produced multiple copies, the work of art came to the consumer: “The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.”\(^{19}\)

While mechanical reproducibility made artworks more accessible, it could not reproduce the particular history of a work of art that existed in a distinct time and place. With its manufactured ubiquity, artworks underwent a type of inflation in which their unique value and authority was lost. Benjamin describes what is lost as that artwork’s aura. To illustrate what he meant, he used the example of watching a mountain range on a horizon or having a branch cast a shadow on one’s own body. One perceived the aura of the mountains or the branch because one sensed those particular mountains or that particular branch at that particular moment. Looking at an image of the mountains, say on the wall of a living room, could not convey the mountains’ aura. The contemporary decay of the aura was accelerated by the desire of the masses to bring things closer.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 216-17.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 220.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 221.
New markets for artworks enabled consumers to buy reproductions instead of going to the mountains, effectively replacing natural presence with reproduced images. As Benjamin stated: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, it reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the images seen by the unarmed eye.”

Ironically, the desire for presence resulted in more distance from the original because it expanded the market for reproductions.

One effect of this was to remove the artwork from the context of tradition, and with this came a change in the artwork’s function. Modern developments were part of a longer historical trajectory in which art became increasingly decontextualized. According to Benjamin: “Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind.”

Ritual performance does not work in general or abstractly, but works to invest a particular place and time with sacrality. The efficacy of ritual depends upon physical and corporeal presence and successful repetition rests on the authority of a religious practitioner combined with a great deal of work to transform a particular experience into something holy. Because a careful and deliberate process of recreating context is an indispensable element of ritual, mechanical reproduction profanes the process. As mentioned earlier, such profanation was no cause for nostalgia on Benjamin’s part: “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.”

Designing an object for reproducibility makes the market part and parcel of every part of the artistic process. Following Marx, Benjamin believed that the market for sacred images ultimately profaned objects of veneration. Because tradition was inextricable from historical development and legitimating institutions, the decontextualizing and deracinating qualities of mechanical reproduction posed a potent threat to authority. As Benjamin explains: “One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.” Thus, the “age” of mechanical reproduction was more than the period of time in which new technological developments happened to take place. Rather, new technologies of reproduction helped to mold a novel historical moment in which mass culture encroached upon traditional authority that “leads to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of cultural heritage.”

In this way, Benjamin provided a technical and logistical account of the liquidation of cultural heritage that Marx prophesied in broader terms. From the Marxist perspective, this crisis of cultural authority was productive, and indeed necessary, for historical progress. By focusing on perception, Benjamin develops a microphysical blueprint for how the collective communist body could be formed from so many individual sensibilities: “During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstance as well.” Once the liquidation of cultural heritage was achieved...

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20 Ibid., 223.
21 Ibid., 223-24.
22 Ibid., 224.
23 Ibid., 221.
24 Ibid., 221.
25 Ibid., 222.
by mechanical reproduction, human sensibility could be liberated from parasitical ritual and tradition. Hopefully, this would pave the way for transformations of material and social environments that were previously unimaginable. This allowed for a new level of activism. As long as the aura privileged the original, it left the artwork unapproachable and inaccessible to mass participation. Rather than encourage a sense of active aesthetic and civic participation, respect for the originality, genius, and authenticity invested in an artwork by its creator celebrated passive appreciation. This was precisely the kind of passivity that could prove so useful to fascism, in which citizens were encouraged to marvel at the creative genius, originality, and will of the leader.

In the age of mechanical reproduction, the destruction of originality and authenticity made political practice possible. As Benjamin explained: “From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.”

To return to the discussion of freedom with which I began this essay, the “politics” that Benjamin describes would be the opposite of the current civic passivity. Rather than limit the state to protecting private property at all costs, the politicized art of communism would hope to foster political institutions based on social activity and participation.

According to Benjamin, a new medium such as film could fulfill its political potential to the extent that it dispensed with bourgeois proclivities for originality or suspicion of mechanical reproducibility. Unlike live theater, the aura that surrounded the performance of an actor disappeared and the presence of an individual performance was replaced by a performance designed for reproducibility. Films were designed for consumption by a public that the actor did not see: “But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And

where is it transported? Before the public. Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market.”

While the film industry responded to this decline of the aura by building a “cult of personality” around the actor, this was little more than commodity fetishism. The celebrity was itself a mass-produced image. Once again, this could be useful for fascism if aura was employed in this reactionary sense. Benjamin’s hope for film lay in his faith that public consumption and not the ritual use would define the value of the artwork: “Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert.”

As film’s popularity eclipsed painting, many critics mourned the loss of the refined aesthetic sensibility necessary to appreciate high art. Rather than mourn with the critics, Benjamin saw their reaction as a symptom of the increasing political significance of film. One sign of the decreasing relevance of a form of art like painting was that it became the object of critical nostalgia that reflected the disparity between the public’s sensual enjoyment and critical suspicion of an overindulgent sensuality. Film’s popularity reflected its connection to the sensorium of the masses, producing a new sense of time and space appropriate to the physis of the modern collective body:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the

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26 Ibid., 224.
27 Ibid., 231.
28 Ibid., 234.
midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly
and adventurously go traveling. With the close-
up, space expands; with slow motion, movement
is extended.\(^{29}\)

As a quintessentially modern technology, images in film were
not just more information. Rather, film promised the
transformation and alteration of popular consciousness that
Benjamin saw in surrealism: “The spectator’s process of
association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their
constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the
film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened
presence of mind.”\(^{30}\) Not surprisingly, these shock effects would
outrage and scandalize the critics who wanted to defend
traditional culture. In particular, some worried that film
dumbed-down the audience by making contemplation
impossible. Film absorbed the consciousness of the audience in
such a way as to distract from individual, private reflection. The
film viewer could not take time to reflect, analyze, and
appreciate, but was instead caught in a series of moving images.
This problem may help to elucidate the political problem of
privacy. Nostalgic critics assumed that private contemplation
typified aesthetic refinement without recognizing that this
assumption reflected a historically specific sensorium
conditioned by bourgeois capitalism. Benjamin saw distraction
as the ground for the formation of a collective consciousness, as
he explained in his distinction between distraction and
concentration: “Distraction and concentration form polar
opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who
concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it…In contrast,
the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.”\(^{31}\)

To extend Benjamin’s point, because the critical defense
of high art privileged private contemplation, it ultimately
undermined the democratic accountability of art. It valorized
private appreciation over public experience in a way that a
Marxist reading would find typically bourgeois. Private
contemplation had been so ingrained as the model for artistic
appreciation that it had come to define aesthetic experience as
such. The inability of critics to see this could be analogous to
the bourgeois equation of property with private property, which
Marx identified as a symptom of an alienated consciousness
“The distinguishing feature of communism is not the abolition of
property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. But
modern bourgeois private property is the final and most
complete expression of the system of producing and
appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, of the
exploitation of the many by the few.”\(^{32}\)

On one hand, the critic who privileged the concentration
demanded by high art hoped to be absorbed in art so that the
artistic value of the artwork and the genius of its creator dictated
aesthetic experience. On the other hand, when artworks were
created for reproducibility, the masses could dictate aesthetic
criteria. In this way, the collective body absorbed the art and in
so doing, made artwork accountable to the sensual (and therefore
political) needs of the people. The aesthetic standard was no
longer the property of the work of art. Film marginalized
private, interior reflection in favor of a collective aesthetic life in
which the market nestled everywhere. This, in turn, could foster
a collective consciousness that could create a communist
sensibility.

Maybe. To return to the point discussed earlier in the
essay, film could also be useful for fascism. As Benjamin
explained: “The growing proletarianization of modern man and
the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same
process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created
proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which
the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in
giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 235-36.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 238.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 239.
express themselves.”

Coupling mass-media expression with the denial of popular material or political accountability sedimented the power of a fascist state that controlled the collective physis without being controlled by it.

**Propaganda, War, and You**

New technologies that helped to create a collective consciousness without fundamentally altering the material status quo were tools of manipulation. Propaganda celebrating the cult of the leader and the aesthetics of warfare could mold a collective sensorium that encouraged passive submission to and identification with the aims of a powerful nation. As Buck-Morss explains: “While condemning the contents of modern culture, [fascism] found in the dreaming collective created by consumer capitalism a ready-at-hand receptacle for its own political phantasmagoria. The psychic porosity of unawakened masses absorbed the staged extravaganzas of mass meetings as readily as it did mass culture.”

Fascism fed off of the aestheticization of political life to preserve or maintain the existing political order. The logical outcome of merging modern aesthetics with traditional conceptions of property is spectacular war. War was a spectacle that sanctioned human control over natural and social worlds without fostering an environment of collective well-being, thereby turning increased productive capacity into awesome powers of destruction.

Another way to put this is that fascism extends the power of the collective body while refusing private pleasure. Or, at least, that it is permissible to derive some pleasure from watching things blow up but far more threatening to use one’s body in ways that do not conform to prescribed social discipline. As Falasca-Zamponi points out, exciting the senses while at the same time denying sensual gratification was a fascist tool that mobilized the masses for war:

> By subscribing to a theory of aesthetic not as bodily senses but as pure form, Mussolini appropriated for himself the role of artist-politician who would give shape to unruly crowds and objectify them while satiating and seducing their chaotic desires. By citing the “masses” unfitness to reach aesthetic purity – the disinterested sphere of art – fascism aestheticized politics through the establishment of a hierarchical order and the installation of a mythical dux.

Returning to the discussion of privacy and liberalism with which I began this essay, it may seem like freedom from state encroachment should be a reasonable answer to this predicament. However, to the extent that the logic of privacy is reducible to the logic of property, especially the kind that can be bought and sold in a market economy, it may actually work to sediment the state’s power to preserve and secure existing inequalities. A market-based pluralism that preserves aura as a commodity is not an apolitical configuration. Imagining religion as property and defending the inviolable right for individuals to dispose of religious capital as they will may only sediment existing inequalities. This is especially the case when religions designed for reproducibility, as commodities to be bought and sold on a spiritual free market, are granted the protections designed for the intimate choices of an individual conscience. What this amounts to is the demand that a reproduced aura is to be tolerated and respected without criticism. Predictably, religious rhetoric and institutions under this dispensation enshrine existing property relations while focusing their attention on regulating bodies.

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35 Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 125.
The fortunes of communism are not looking so good these days. But regardless of whether one wants to accept Benjamin’s political prescriptions, his cautionary tale of fascist tendencies in modern life may be prophetic. Benjamin’s provocation is to think politically without reference to an autonomous rational subject that can heroically resist aesthetic manipulation. All this being said, I do not believe that Benjamin could personally function within a uniform conscience or body that would merge seamlessly with the masses. The creation of any such uniformity under capitalism could only heighten alienation. Indeed, it is one of the triumphs of a market-based consciousness that pluralism is equated with free consumer choice, thereby obscuring the homogenizing work of markets. That collectivity and pluralism are perceived to be antithetical demonstrates the current impoverishment of social and political institutions. Whatever problems liberalism may have, they are preferable to reactionary projects to recover or reinstitute lost religious foundations. Benjamin would have little time for fundamentalism on the Right or Radical Orthodoxy on the Left as the technological and cultural predicaments of modernity do not just go away with wishful thinking.

In conclusion, to the extent that religious actors and institutions attempt to enshrine existing modes of economic and cultural production without seeking greater democratic accountability, Benjamin’s observations about fascism may be prescient. This may also help to explain why so much of current discussions of religious “values” are reducible to political questions about how to regulate bodies. So called “value-issues” (abortion, same-sex marriage, sex education, to name just a few) are a laundry list of political concerns about the state’s prescription about what kinds of decisions citizens should be able to make with regard to their own bodies without regard to the health and well-being of those bodies in actual social life. In response to this, some religious actors on the left have argued that economic justice is a matter of value. Whatever the merit of this position, the fact that it seems counterintuitive (and unconvincing) to so many voters might support Benjamin’s observations about the collective physis under bourgeois capitalism. The rhetoric of privacy may not provide a way out of this predicament if it continues to frame “rights” over one’s body as a kind of inviolable property. Such liberal tolerance provides cold comfort if it provides mere legal toleration for practices that can be legitimately condemned, as long as such condemnation is done within the protected space of religious conviction. It might be more helpful to consider intellectual or corporeal freedom as public goods that benefit collective welfare instead of inviolate spaces that each individual may dispose of as he or she sees fit. This would require a heightening of differences rather than faceless homogeneity. Imagining freedom in this way would take work and be a great deal more complex than a passive acquiescence to the absolutism of consumer choice. After all, freedom isn’t free.