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Enjoying All Things in Common: Toward a Theology of Hoarding

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We have probably all heard reports and seen video footage of people hoarding numerous essential and, in some cases, non-essential items during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the global economy and life in general beginning in early 2020. Although hoarding, as a particular socio-economic practice, may come across as frustrating but ultimately benign, in what follows, I draw on theological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, and socio-economic thought to outline an understanding of hoarding, broadly construed, as endemic to the myth of scarcity that drives capitalist economies. Like most myths, the idea that resources are limited and must be gained via competition, is not so much descriptive but prescriptive of reality: it provides ideological cover for certain practices, in this case accumulation and the refusal to share basic goods with each other, that is, communally. The myth of scarcity drives hoarding, justifying it as perfectly rational, but there are other stories or myths that we can adopt that are not just less destructive but may, in fact, incite us to think otherwise about our relationship to things, differently than the myth of scarcity envisions. To make these claims, in the first part of this paper I briefly outline a different vision of social existence through a philosophical analysis of the so-called Christian communism of Acts 4 and its attempted negation by Ananais and Sapphira in Acts 5, who were struck dead for their failure to adhere to community guidelines with respect to their property. The relationship between these two episodes illustrates the point that, for the fledging Christian community, belonging entails the community-wide sharing of previously private wealth and resources. In the second part of this paper and using the work of José Porfirio Miranda and Todd McGowan in particular, I juxtapose these claims with a broader understanding of wealth, one that focuses on the “sin” of differential wealth and how it relates to the notions of scarcity and abundance, taken at both the individual level and the socio-economic level. In third part of this paper, I develop a concept of hoarding, both in light of COVID-19 but in general, as an extreme but indelibly capitalist practice. The latter feature

becomes clearer if we take money as an object that is hoarded as well, which means that differentiating wealth is hoarded wealth.

Acts 4 and Communism

According to Acts 4, the fledgling Christian community eschewed “private ownership of any possessions” and held everything “in common” (4:32).¹ Communal ownership enabled them to meet the needs of everyone in the community, both individually and collectively (“[t]here was not a needy person among them” [4:34]). Acts 2 relays virtually the same, although with slightly less detail: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possession and goods and distribute to the proceeds of all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Generally speaking, in the Roman Empire, wealth was first and foremost material, in the sense that it was land-based. Private property, gained in various ways but ultimately through dispossession and enclosure, served as the means for the generation of value, via rents and production for ever-expanding markets. As Peter Brown puts it, in “the overwhelming majority of cases, wealth was land turned by labor into food, which, in the case of the rich, was turned into sufficient money to be turned into privilege and power.”² Acts 4 suggests that the early Christian community reversed the material accumulation of wealth along these lines, in the sense that it relied on the liquidation of land-holdings among wealthier members to directly benefit the community as a whole. Acts 4 tells us that “as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold” (4:34). The apostles governed the distribution of resources gained via such liquidation, redistributing to “each as any had need” (4:35). Paradigmatic, according to the narrative, is a certain Levite named Joseph, renamed Barnabas, who “sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (4:37).³

Marx recapitulates or resurrects, to use the language of Alain Badiou, this idea of communal ownership to meet individual and collective needs for his own idea of communism, at least in its more developed forms.⁴ Hence Marx’s famous claim in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety, and society inscribe on its banner: *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*⁵

A capitalist socio-economic system, according to Marx, fails to account for ability and need, because it considers the individual only in terms of abstraction rather than as such. That is, an individual’s labor functions in the same way as use-value does with reference to exchange-value: abstract labor subjects an individual’s specific abilities and needs to a general equivalent. All of this is another way of saying that the labor theory of value does not take the individual into account at all but only the general equivalent, the abstraction. Practically speaking, this means that, when considering the individual in light of production, the quantity of labor put in is and remains the determining factor. As Marx

puts it, "The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another."⁶ The system of bourgeois right, then, dissolves difference, reducing individuals to the same standard. Labor matters first, rather than abilities or needs, which means that the capitalist socio-economic system considers all individuals as equals, at least abstractly, in reference to a common standard of value. The problem, however, is that individuals are not materially equal, as Marx recognizes, which in effect means that capitalism can only ever be a system of inequality.

But one is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labor in the same time, or can labor for a longer time; and labor, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measure. The *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges. *It is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right.*⁷

Marx's critique is not limited to the inequality of so-called natural privileges. His larger point is that abstract labor value treats individuals only as workers, ignoring other aspects of individuality pertinent to material existence, to life itself. For instance, Marx notes that "one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth."⁸ As Michel Henry points out, Marx's critique of equality so understood amounts to a critique of objectivity as such, in favor of an "affirmation of the radical immanence of life."⁹ Marx's theoretical rejection of a general equivalence when it comes to labor, then, values each individual individually in terms of their capacities and needs which, for Henry, means that each individual finds their value in "the interiority proper to it." Translated into more concrete terms, each person in such a schema "can perform the activity that is best suited to him" without concern for needs, which cannot be adjudicated through an abstract, general equivalent.¹⁰ Henry thus notes that Marx envisions a society of "abundance, or rather overabundance," in which "each person nevertheless finds in the social wealth the possibility of satisfying all his other needs."¹¹ I return to this below, but such abundance is possible to the extent that labor power becomes socialized. That is, the power of workers taken as a whole is greater than the power of any one individual at and for any given time. The power can be harnessed toward the good of all, as per Marx. However, as Mario Tronti emphasizes, capitalism in contrast exploits this power, in that it does not assign value to the mass of individuals as one but rather to individuals individually, via wages.¹² The power of the collective over that of the individual, then, remains as unpaid labor, functioning as a mass of free labor for the generation of surplus-value that flows upward, to the owners. [this is especially so in the unpaid labor of social media data producing...] I return to the notion of abundance, to refer back to Henry's term, below. For now, it is enough to note that Marx's determination of the particularity of abilities and needs over-against abstract value colludes with the biblical depiction of the proto-Christian community as found in early chapters of Acts, even if they are not interchangeable.

The relationship between Marxism and Christianity, on this point and numerous others beyond the scope of my argument, has never been lost on interpreters, especially those concerned with using Marx's critical socio-economic theory for more explicit theological purposes. The liberation theologian José Porfirio Miranda, for instance, aligns

the two in his claim that “Christianity is communism,” though he is careful to distance himself from a strictly materialist viewpoint, as a way to preserve other theological commitments such as God’s transcendence and the spiritual nature of human beings.¹³ What Miranda means at a basic level in this claim is, nevertheless, rooted in Acts 2 and 4, in which we see the “literary” articulation of the “universality of communism.” Speaking of those who would join the community through the liquidation of their wealth, he observes, “If they wanted to be Christians the condition was communism.”¹⁴ More specifically, the community as presented incarnates the “spirit of justice, the spirit of love of the needy and afflicted.”¹⁵

One can thus characterize the community as depicted in the early chapters of Acts variously – as a form of communism, as organized around abundance or overabundance, as a community of justice. Whatever terms we may use, what is clear is that the community’s concerns with the needs of individuals individually and as part of a larger whole, contrasts sharply with Acts 5. Here we find the infamous story of Ananias and Sapphira, which is worth quoting at length.

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things. (5:1-11)

The narrative contrasts the actions of Barnabas with those of Ananias and Sapphira. Barnabas, as discussed above, sold his property and, apparently, gave it all to the apostles so that it could be redistributed to those in need. Ananias and Sapphira did the same but, however, without giving all of the proceeds from the sale. The couple held back on some of the proceeds, not only keeping part for themselves but also lying about it. The punishment (both were struck dead, according to the narrative) may seem harsh for what amounts to greed or covetousness, but more is at stake. As Craig Keener puts it, “Ananias and Sapphira wanted to join God’s community while also retaining their personal autonomy from God’s authority. They thereby risked infiltrating God’s church with Satan’s agenda (5:3).”¹⁶

Although Keener does not note the connection, we can understand Ananias’ and Sapphira’s punishment more generally as well, with reference to the disjunction between

God and mammon or wealth (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus states the opposition as part of the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 - 7): "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [mammon]." In the Gospel of Luke, which has more direct bearing on Acts as part of the Luke-Acts narrative, it is the denouement to the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13): "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [mammon]" (16:13). Although the context differs, both utterances mean essentially the same thing at a basic level in the broader scope of Jesus' teachings. Specifically, Jesus states clearly that the relationship between God and mammon should obey the logic of "either/or" rather than that of "both/and." One can serve *either* God *or* mammon, but not both simultaneously. This is because, in Jesus's teachings as found in the gospels, God and mammon compete with each other as loci of value. Both, that is, claim to be the value of values, the principle by and through which all other aspects of existence maintain themselves. As Philip Goodchild puts it, both compete for our time, attention, and devotion, directing and distributing our lives accordingly.¹⁷ Thus, from the perspective of God, following mammon takes the form of sin, in that doing so necessarily entails turning away from God toward what is not God or, more specifically, another God.¹⁸

As organizing principles, as values of values, both claim allegiance absolutely but in opposition to each other, which is why one cannot, according to Jesus, have it both ways: no one can serve two masters. I cannot here discuss in detail the various ways Jesus articulates the disjunction between God and mammon, but one paradigmatic example is the Parable of the Rich Ruler (Luke 18:18-30). To summarize quickly, in the parable a wealthy ruler comes to Jesus to inquire what he must do to gain eternal life. Although he has, on his own telling, kept the required commandments, Jesus counsels that there remains one sticking point: "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). Because he was very wealthy and, as the parable implies, could not countenance parting with all his wealth, he walks away, forgoing "eternal" life for the sake of his riches. Jesus then tells his disciples, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Although his disciples chafe at the Jesus' claim, considering it wholly unfeasible, he assures them, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27).

Returning to Ananias and Sapphira with the disjunction between God and mammon in mind, we can see that the problem cannot simply be reduced to a moral one. The primary problem, that is, is not that they attempted to dissemble with respect to the profit from the sold land. Although they did indeed lie, claiming that they had presented all of the money made from the sale of their land to the apostles, the problem goes deeper. The problem is that they try to have it both ways, attempting to participate in the life of the community in terms of "both/and." One could say that, by colluding to keep a portion of their wealth, Ananias and Sapphira attempt to have one foot in the community and one foot out. One cannot, however, straddle the line that divides the community from its putative outside, that separates it from mammon which, in the narrative, also goes under the name "Satan." Ananias and Sapphira attempt to maintain a portion of their wealth over-against the notion of need but, in so doing, they show that their allegiance lies

elsewhere: they serve mammon rather than God. In the language of Acts, this is the “lie” that is involved. As Peter asks Ananias rhetorically, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?” Such a relationship with wealth has no place in the fledgling Christian community, because the ideal to which it holds considers wealth differently, as subject to the needs of individuals and the group entire. As Miranda glosses the point, “If they wanted to be Christians the condition was communism.”¹⁹

Differentiating Wealth and the Fantasies of Scarcity and Abundance

Many of the strands that make up the biblical narratives cast suspicion on wealth, equating practices with regard to it as sinful or just downright evil. I Timothy 6:10 provides as pithy a summation as any of such thinking, at least when taken at the individual level. “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,” the author writes, “and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” Nevertheless, at this point I have mainly relied on a colloquial understanding of wealth, specifying the form it takes at a structural level. Even at that level, wealth can be understood in various ways, but in what follows I highlight a notion of wealth around the practices of differentiation, accumulation, and hoarding.

As Miranda emphasizes, biblical critiques of wealth do not so much critique wealth as such but differentiating wealth, that is, wealth as constituted in asymmetrical relationships between and among individuals and larger groups. Wealth, in this sense, is a relational concept and is thus relative to context, but more often than not is chastised, subject to punishment precisely because of the asymmetry involved. Luke’s version of the Beatitudes makes such differentiation and castigation clear:

Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
[. . .]
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep. (Luke 6:21-25)

Jesus’ words, here, set poor and rich against each other, but it is the poor who ultimately win out in the end: the rich become subject to judgment.²⁰

A parable that expresses what is at issue here more sharply is The Rich Man and Lazarus.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by

his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. (Luke 6:19-31)

We see the differentiation between both parties here, but it is important to emphasize the rich man functions as a cipher for the stark contrast, which is the main point of contention. The rich man does not directly do anything to Lazarus but simply ignores him because of the differentiation involved. The rich man is punished because he is rich over-against Lazarus, who apparently possesses nothing. As Miranda puts it, "The parable does not say, because you lived in abundance – which would have been to condemn wealth in an absolute sense. It says, because you lived in abundance and Lazarus in misery. What is punished, in torment, is that some are rich and others are poor."²¹ To fill out this claim more fully, Gustavo Gutiérrez describes the asymmetrical relationship between rich and poor as a "situation of sin."²² For Gutiérrez sin cannot be understood solely in terms of "the intimate sanctuary of the heart." Rather, sin is always relational or interpersonal, meaning that it must always be understood in terms of justice. Indeed, it is justice that the parable has in mind when reminding the rich man that he and his family have had "Moses and the prophets" all along. As concerned with justice, the parable, then, not only judges the rich but advocates for the "desperately poor."²³ Such concern expresses itself as a "preferential option for the poor" which, for Gutiérrez, finds ultimate theological justification in Christ's incarnation. The kenotic Christ shows that love is solidarity in the "struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides persons and allows that there be rich and poor, possessors and dispossessed, oppressors and oppressed."²⁴

Wealth so understood as differentiating wealth, then, entails its opposite, meaning that wealth is an accrued excess over one's own needs and the needs of others. Wealth, that is, does not understand needs communally, as in Acts 4, but views needs individually or in terms of limited spheres of influence. The creation of differential wealth achieves that excess via practices of accumulation or, better put, uneven accumulation.

The term accumulation immediately calls to Marx's discussion of so-called primitive accumulation, which he considers the starting point of the capitalist machine entire. Primitive accumulation is the dispossession of the means of production from the people, the enclosure of forms of the common via the forced establishment of private property. Primitive accumulation is, simply put, theft in the guise of modernization, industrialization, and progress. Marx writes, "The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the

means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it."²⁵ Such accumulation is "primitive," because it inaugurates the whole process of labor power, capitalist production, and surplus value; it remains, however, technically outside the process itself. Marx sees a connection between primitive accumulation and the Christian idea of original sin.

This primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past. In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential.²⁶

For Marx, the post-fall injunction in Genesis 3 that life would be forever after constituted through toil and struggle (Gen. 3:14-19) only seems to apply to the dispossessed; those on the other side of primitive accumulation, the dispossessors, know no such life other than via distance, in the asymmetry of differential wealth.

That said, I want to keep the connection to sin but work with a more general understanding of accumulation, taking it as an essential means of maintaining differentiating wealth and setting it against simple use. Todd McGowan's psychoanalytic reading of the function of desire in capitalism is helpful here, in that he provides us with a way of grasping how accumulation relies on the dual fantasies of scarcity and abundance. Capitalism, ideologically and economically, depends on the perception or belief that "scarcity is the natural condition of humanity."²⁷ Exchange and accumulation assume scarcity, or at least its ever present threat. The subject acts as a consumer of goods on the assumption that there is not enough to go around, meaning that the capitalist subject is always insecure, threatened with a lack of resources. Neo-liberal capitalism amplifies such insecurity, as the welfare state continues to wither away, subjecting individuals to increased austerity and precarity.²⁸ As McGowan puts it, capitalism depends on the subject's "belief that an absence of plentiful resources looms just around the corner."²⁹ It is important to emphasize that it is *belief* in an absence rather than absence itself that drives the subject and the economy more generally. Capitalism justifies itself ideologically on the assumption that resources are limited; scarcity is, thus, axiomatic to the capitalist enterprise, taking the form of an "immutable law." McGowan writes, "If nature provided abundance or society achieved it, there would be no struggle to allocate resources and no need to distribute them unevenly. Capitalism would have no place in an abundant world. In other words, if scarcity didn't exist, capitalism would have to invent it. And when scarcity begins to disappear, capitalism does embark on the task of reinventing itself over and over again. Arguing on behalf of capitalism requires an investment in the inevitability of scarcity as an article of faith."³⁰

Nevertheless, as McGowan also points out, capitalism promises an exit from this scarcity: it pits itself as the solution to the very problem that makes it possible in the first place. Capitalism is, in this sense, dialectical: although capitalism assumes scarcity,

using it as a threat to drive accumulation, it actually promises the opposite: abundance. McGowan write, "As a socioeconomic system, capitalism shares the formal structure of fantasy; it introduces a cause for scarcity (the natural competition for resources) that retroactively creates the illusion of a lost original abundance, and then it provides a solution (unbridled capitalist accumulation) that will lead to future abundance."³¹ As fantasy, however, abundance must always remain in abeyance, an end or goal that can never be achieved. That is, the subject constitutes itself, driving itself to maintain itself, via lack, which takes the form of an always-already unrequited desire. In Lacanian terms, the subject desires *objet petit a*, the lost object-cause of desire. Slavoj Žižek characterizes the latter in terms of "the coincidence of emergence and loss" or "as being-lost."³²

So understood, accumulation is doubly-constituted, via socio-historical myth and the lack in the subject's desire. On the one hand, the socio-economic myth of scarcity propels competition for supposedly scarce resources which, in turn, results in real disparities and differentiations. On the other hand, the myth of scarcity mirrors the subject's own desire. Indeed, scarcity serves as justification for that desire, providing a narrative that confirms the subject's own lack with respect to their desire which, we assume, could be fulfilled if only the other's desire did not impede or block ours. If we could somehow overcome scarcity, this fantasy tells us, then our desires would be met and we would be whole or filled, lacking any lack. As McGowan puts it, "if it weren't for the scarcity, we believe, we could access the ultimate satisfaction, and we can anticipate it when we overcome scarcity."³³ Hence the isomorphic relationship the capitalist system and its subjects:

As a socioeconomic system, capitalism shares the formal structure of fantasy; it introduces a cause for scarcity (the natural competition for resources) that retroactively creates the illusion of a lost original abundance, and then it provides a solution (unbridled capitalist accumulation) that will lead to future abundance.³⁴

Although McGowan does not mention it, we can also see here the isomorphism between capitalism and Christianity, especially in the latter's telling of history as a history of salvation: Christianity starts with creation (abundance), which is lost via the fall and the introduction of sin into the world (lost original abundance, but looks to the future for redemption via Christ's atonement for sin through which creation will be restored (unbridled capitalist accumulation that will lead to future abundance). Both capitalism and Christianity, then, depend on "sin," not in some simplistic moral sense but structurally, as lack/sin drives both, as Žižek recognizes as well.³⁵ For McGowan it is the struggle for abundance/redemption that appeals to us, meaning that "if we give up the fantasy of either present scarcity or the illusion of future abundance, we give up capitalism as such."³⁶

Hoarding

To tease out the relationship between scarcity and abundance in more detail in relation to the subject's desire, I turn to the phenomenon of hoarding. The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines "hoarding disorder" as "characterized by persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value, as a result of a strong persistent need to

save the items and to distress associated with discarding them.”³⁷ The overwhelming majority of hoarders (80% - 90%) acquire and accumulate items excessively, whether from buying or the attainment of free items; stealing, however, is a less common characteristic of hoarders. Hoarding is not the same thing as collecting. People collect for a variety of reasons, but what a collector collects is both specified in some way and, more importantly, organized. Those with hoarding disorder, in contrast, appear to accumulate relatively random items, storing and keeping them in unorganized fashion. The DSM-V notes the “symptoms of hoarding disorder result in the accumulation of a large number of possessions that congest and clutter active living areas to the extent that their intended use is substantially compromised.”³⁸ People with hoarding disorder often accumulate and become attached to items that others would deem useless to keep over the long term, such as newspapers, magazines, old clothes, bags, mail, paperwork, and containers. We could say that, for the hoarder, such items contain a value in surplus over their ordinary, so-called normal use. However, virtually any item can be hoarded and, as the DSM-V points out, many individuals “collect and save large numbers of valuable things as well, which are often found in piles mixed with other less valuable items.”³⁹ So much should be familiar to those who have watched the American reality television show *Hoarders*, which depicts the struggles, difficulties, and treatment of those with the disorder and the impact on families.

The key difference between collecting and hoarding, however, has to do with distress, to the ways in which the practice interferes with the ability to function “normally.” To be sure, what counts as normal is defined by the status quo, and some of those with hoarding disorder maintain that they should have the freedom to live according to their own standards. However, in the case of hoarding disorder, “normal” function has more to do with health and well-being, with respect to the individual but also at times to neighbors, friends, and family. The difference, then, is between quantity and quality. “Hoarding is not defined by the number of possessions, but by how the acquisition and management of those possessions affect the owner. When hoarding causes distress or impairs one’s ability to perform basic functions, it has crossed the line into pathology.”⁴⁰

Another American reality television show, *American Pickers*, marks the contrast between quantity and quality well. The show follows “pickers” around “the country as they scour the country for hidden gems in junkyards, basements, garages and barns, meeting quirky characters and hearing their amazing stories.”⁴¹ To do so, pickers often “have to dig through boxes or piles filled with items that have accumulated over the years, which are often located in such places as barns or spare rooms in the owners’ homes.” The pickers lowball (i.e. make an offer well below market or resale value) items deemed valuable, then resell them via their own business, Antique Archaeology, which also serves as a virtual platform for their own branded items. The show trades on nostalgia, focusing on objects that many of its viewers will have or remember some connection to. In so doing, the show focuses not just on objects but an idea, Americana, which is in many ways the real commodity involved.

Given that the locations and places of residence pictured on the show are presented as in various states of clutter and disorganization, practices of hoarding may come to mind and, as I suggest below, such an assessment has something to it. However, the objects which the pickers pick have value beyond the sphere of the collector; the

objects are, for the most part, “antiques,” valuable as objects of exchange in a market beyond the psychological attachments and material proclivities of the collector. The show televises commodity fetishism but, as Eric S. Jenkins observes, the show in addition transforms “affections into images.” Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s discussion of the control society as distinct from a disciplinary society, Jenkins writes, “Pickers constitutes a strategy of control via the creation of topoi for consumption – in the dual sense of place (a website and store) and topic (of discussion) that allows the enterprise to transform their products, gain privileged access to markets, and track, target, and channel consumers into profitable outlets.”⁴² In a way, the show is more of an extended advertisement for entrepreneurship of the self, to use Foucauldian terminology.⁴³

The individuals encountered on *American Pickers*, moreover, do not seem in distress in regard to their collecting and collections, at least as the show presents them to our gaze. Nevertheless, although *American Pickers* focuses on objects rather than individuals while *Hoarders* focuses on individuals rather than objects, the line between the two always remains permeable. We see this, for instance, in Season 10, Episode 2 of *Hoarders* with the case of “Linda,” who picks and resells items at a profit but also hoards enough excess items to fill three houses. Whatever the specific cognitive mechanisms in play and without minimizing the real distress involved, compulsive hoarding is, as Daniel Lord Smail points out, a “product of history.” He notes that it “emerged in the context of the changing material niche generated by modern patterns of industrial production and in particular is associated with the growth of consumption . . . It is the result of the historically contingent way in which the changing material niche created by modern global capitalism has intersected in unpredictable ways with latent features of cognitive architecture.”⁴⁴ Hoarding depends, that is, on mass production and consumption, on the generation of a material excess over-against need. Compulsive hoarding is, then, the epitome of accumulation and, as such, participates in the dialectic between scarcity and abundance discussed above.

If this is the case, then we should understand compulsive hoarding as an extreme form of accumulation, meaning that it is at the extremity of common behavioral patterns that capitalism produces. Although we may classify certain cases as reflective of mental illness, capitalism is essentially a hoarding economy, which means that we are all, variously but for the most part, hoarders. Although the drive to hoard certainly has a neurological basis, it cannot be reduced to this, as it expresses a particular way to relate to objects and others.

Numerous examples could support this claim, but consider the following. In the United States during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many “stocked up” on putatively essential items, in anticipation of sustained periods of social distancing and isolation, store closures, and supply-chain interruptions. One of the items that people sought out was toilet paper, so much so that, very early on, stores quickly ran out. The appearance and threat of toilet paper shortages, in turn, caused more people to seek out the item, which in turn apparently caused more shortages. Stores began to impose limits on the amount that one could buy, as toilet paper became almost impossible to keep in stock. That toilet paper would be one of the main foci of such hoarding behavior is, in a way, understandable, but it is not essential – if necessary, a washcloth and water would do the trick. Perhaps that method of cleaning up after one’s waste is not appealing, but

that need not translate into amassing toilet paper for one's own use at the expense of others.

Even if, as we found out later, there were actual problems in the supply-chain, the perception that one needs to hoard an item such as toilet paper is the actual problem here.⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek likes to tell a similar illustrative story that, interestingly enough, also involves toilet paper. He quips that in the 1970s in Yugoslavia

There was enough toilet paper in stores. But rumors started to circulate that there will be a shortage of toilet paper. So now comes the beauty. What happened? People, contrary to what we usually assume, did not come to distrust authorities. They accepted that there is enough toilet paper but reasoned this way: "What if there are some idiots, who really think there is not enough toilet paper, so to make sure they have it they will start to buy it like crazy, and there really will not be enough toilet paper. To prevent that, it's good for me to go now and buy a lot of toilet paper." You see the point: nobody believed that there really is not enough toilet paper. It's enough to presuppose that there is another one who believes in it, and the end result is the same.⁴⁶

Even if one thinks that stocking up on something like toilet paper is irrational, the assumption that others are doing so leads one to do the same. In this sense, the perception and/or anticipation of scarcity drives real scarcity. Moreover, as memes began to multiply surrounding toilet paper shortages during the first months of the pandemic, to draw the discussion back to McGowan's analysis of the relationship between abundance and lack, what people started to enjoy was the lack itself.

Criticizing something like hoarding toilet paper easy may seem like low hanging fruit. Even *Forbes*, the well-known business media company, ran an article criticizing the practice as "publicly harmful, even anti-social."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, we rightly criticize hoarding when it comes to basic goods, but we do not often consider the hoarding of money, which we euphemize in terms of "success" and "wealth," as equally pathological. Hoarding money, however, is also a more serious, more insidious form of hoarding, because it seeks to preserve not just an excess of value but an excess of the value of values.

The notion of hoarding wealth in the form of money calls to mind the figure of the miser. The miser falls on the far end of accumulation, as he refuses as much as possible to expend his money, even to the point of depriving himself of what others would normally deem necessary. The miser does not use his money, in other words, which also means that he does not enjoy his money. What the miser enjoys, rather, is accumulation itself, the act of acquiring, increasing, and stockpiling wealth. If, as Freud argues, money is akin to shit, then the miser is anal retentive in the literal sense, as he gets off on the possessive control of his excrement.⁴⁸

Although the miser mostly appears as a figure to bemoan, since his actions express the sin of avarice or greed, he can appear heroic, at least after the fact. A familiar, if occasional, figure of personal interest is the miser who, upon his death, bequeaths his hidden fortune to some individual or entity, much to their surprise. For instance, the American news outlet CBS ran a story in 2019 about a man named Dale Schroeder, a carpenter who came from poverty and whom friends described as "humble" and "frugal." All the frugality paid off. By the time he died he had accumulated close to

three million dollars, much to the surprise of those close to him. Having neither a partner nor children, he willed the money to some thirty-three individuals in the form of college tuition. The article ends by noting that, although it is impossible to pay back such a debt, one can “emulate” Dale and “pay it forward.”⁴⁹

One could argue that categorizing Schroeder and others like him as miserly is crass, as such contemporaneous acts of individual asceticism or sacrifice go on to benefit others as charity. Charity, however, still implies control of one’s shit, to continue with the Freudian metaphor. Moreover, it presupposes whatever socio-economic system in which it finds itself – here, neoliberal or late capitalism – as given, determinative of how one acts with respect to others. Charity assumes, that is, scarcity which, in the case mentioned above, is clear in the fact the thirty-three students needed tuition in the first place.

To push a bit further, we should understand miserliness, at least relatively speaking, as a feature of differentiating wealth as such, since it is based on the asymmetrical accumulation of wealth over-against need and its enjoyment. For instance, Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of Amazon, has at the time of this writing an estimated net worth of almost \$156.6 billion USD, which makes him the richest man in the world. While others hoarded toilet paper during the first months of the pandemic, he accumulated wealth to hoard. At the time of writing, he had added almost \$35 billion USD to his wealth, and some projections have him becoming the world’s first trillionaire by 2026. Although his lavish lifestyle might not immediately call to mind the figure of the miser, relatively speaking he is just that, given the asymmetrical accumulation of wealth over individual expenditure. We should not, then, be impressed with large-dollar donations on his part: these, such as the \$100 million USD he donated in April 2020 to the Feeding America for the Covid-19 Response Fund, pales in comparison to what he did not give.⁵⁰

Jesus illustrates the point here, with respect to the “Widow’s Offering” in Luke 21:2-4.

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

Bezos contributes out of his abundance, but only to the extent that he can also keep his abundance. Far from being a model, we can criticize him as less charitable than those who contribute out of their lack, their relative poverty. Or, to bring matters back to Acts 4 and 5, he is Ananais and Sapphira, the condemned. Money is, certainly, a different sort of object than, say, toilet paper, but the underlying ideology is the same: hoarding money assumes the already-mentioned myth of scarcity and the same atomized understanding of the self.

Conclusion: From Accumulation to Enjoyment

At the end of *Capitalism and Desire*, McGowan quotes a seemingly insignificant passage from the second volume of Marx’s *Capital*, “For capitalism is already essentially abolished once we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself.”⁵¹ Glossing Marx, McGowan argues that the myth of scarcity and its

corollary in desire may not be natural, writ into the edifice of being, but it is “a necessity for the subject.”⁵² If abundance is accessible outside the confines of the myth of scarcity, then abundance cannot be separated from scarcity. Doing so amounts to destroying desire, the constitutive of the subject. Scarcity, that is, must be contained within abundance. McGowan writes, “Even when we have enough for everyone, lack will continue to structure our subjectivity. We still experience ourselves as lacking subjects in an abundant world because no amount of abundance will provide the missing lost object. Abundance would make the psychic necessity of scarcity abundantly clear.”⁵³

What folding scarcity into abundance looks like concretely may appear difficult to grasp, given the level of abstraction involved in its discussion. Whatever form it takes concretely would have to involve, at a minimum, fostering different ways of relating to objects and each other, one that shifts desire away from accumulation and toward enjoyment. Accumulation and enjoyment are, of course, not necessarily opposed to each other: the practice of accumulation does provide enjoyment, in the psychoanalytical sense of the term. Nevertheless, such enjoyment is, as I have outlined above, more directed to accumulation and control, hence the Freudian claim concerning money as shit.

Perhaps we find a glimpse of a different paradigm in Acts 4, which, as discussed above, provides a snapshot of communal use against accumulation or ownership. Taking that idea seriously might provide us with the resources to think beyond the myth of scarcity and the practices that surround it, such as hoarding. Abundance, in this way, would not be tied to scarcity via accumulation but, rather, to enjoyment, the subject's own but also enjoyment of the other's enjoyment – so much is, it seems, implied in Acts 4, which envisions overcoming the sin of and in differentiating wealth and accumulation:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

The community here is not devoid of scarcity but, rather, redistributes it to the community entire, meaning that the notion of communal abundance pictured envisioned is one in which abundance is folded into scarcity. Enjoyment, then, takes place here in the communal-wide use of wealth and resources to meet needs, individually and collectively.

Notes

¹ All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, cited in text.

² Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350 – 550 AD* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012), 3.

³ Christina Petterson has argued that the “utopian” vision of “so-called Christian communism” (55) still remains trapped within the hierarchical and parochial assumptions of empire, seen here in the fact that the leaders of the community direct the redistribution of resources according to their own mandates, including along the lines of insiders and outsiders. At a socio-historical level, recapitulating such assumptions seems inevitable to some degree, but this does not necessarily invalidate the idea present in concrete

practices, which is what I am more interested in. See Christina Petterson, *Acts of Empire* (Eugene: Cascade, 2020), 39–56.

⁴ Badiou uses the language of “resurrection” to designate the reincorporation of a past fragment of a truth procedure into a present situation. For a formal discussion of this procedure, see Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 45–78.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The Marx and Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 531; emphasis in original.

⁶ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 530.

⁷ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 530; emphasis in original.

⁸ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 531.

⁹ Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, trans. Kathleen Blamey McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 198.

¹⁰ Henry, *Marx*, 198.

¹¹ Henry, *Marx*, 198.

¹² Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder (London: Verso, 2019), 142–150.

¹³ José Porfirio Miranda, *Communism in the Bible*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1982), 1–20.

One of the more common critiques of liberation theologies is that they ignore how Marx’s materialism also functions to critique religion, specifically Christianity. Marx sees the critique of religion as prerequisite for the critique of socio-economic processes and the state. The “abolition” of religion, in this sense, prefigures “emancipation” (Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, in *The Marx and Engels Reader*, 28). Miranda, however, essentially agrees with Marx’s critique of religion to outline his communist version of Christianity. Whatever the case, religion is more complicated in Marx’s thought than is usually assumed. As Roland Boer has pointed out, Marx’s critique of idealism often leads Marx to “espouse a vulgar form of materialism, in which religion – among other idealist forms – are mere excrescences of the brain. Although the vulgar form always remains a part of Marxism, it is always tied in with sophisticated dialectical formulations, in which ideas are both produced by material conditions and contribute to the production of those conditions. The complex dialectic is found at the heart of his arguments concerning capitalism and fetishism” (Roland Boer, “Karl Marx,” in *Religion and European Philosophy*, eds. Philip Goodchild and Hollis Phelps (London: Routledge, 2017), 93.

¹⁴ Miranda, *Communism in the Bible*, 7.

¹⁵ José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, trans. John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1974.), 223.

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 263.

¹⁷ Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: 2009), 5–7.

¹⁸ The notion of sin as “turning from” or “turning away” can be seen, for instance, in St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), where he characterizes sin as “turning from eternal things to things corruptible, by counsel of the devil” (30).

¹⁹ Miranda, *Communism in the Bible*, 7.

²⁰ It is important, in this respect, that Jesus largely confines his activity to the countryside rather than the *polis*, save for Jerusalem. As Christina Petterson has discussed, the distinction between the two corresponds to class differences as well, meaning that the spatial division implies Jesus puts Jesus on the side of the peasant classes rather than the ruling classes. As Petterson also emphasizes, this does not mean that the gospels are free of ruling class ideologies. See Petterson, *Acts of Empire*, 39–56.

²¹ Miranda, *Communism in the Bible*, 23.

²² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, in *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 157.

²³ William R. Herzog, II, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 130.

²⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 172.

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 874–5.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 873.

²⁷ Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Costs of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 230.

²⁸ This is, in part, Maurizio Lazzarato’s argument in *The Making of the Indebted Man*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

²⁹ McGowan, 230.

³⁰ McGowan, 232.

³¹ McGowan, 237.

³² Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 13. It is not incidental that Žižek goes on to discuss this notion in light of the theological notions of the Fall and the original sin.

³³ McGowan, 235.

³⁴ McGowan, 237.

³⁵ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 13-16.

³⁶ McGowan, 238. We can note here that this is where Walter Benjamin's diagnosis of the religious nature of capitalism remains off, or at the very least incomplete. Benjamin rightly notes the relationship between capitalism and Christianity, using the notion of parasitism to link the two. However, Benjamin argues that what makes capitalism novel with respect to other religions is that it is a religion without redemption. He writes, "Capitalism is entirely without precedent in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction. It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation." Benjamin's criticism of capitalism from this perspective is rhetorically effective, as seen in how often it is cited in contemporary discussions of the religious or theological nature of capitalism. From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, Benjamin fails to address the enjoyment found in the dialectical interplay of lack and abundance, as McGowan discusses. Capitalism *constantly* and as a rule offers redemption, which links it to Christianity as well, in the sense that, theologically speaking, the eschaton must always-already remain outstanding. Both capitalism and Christianity offer a redemption that can never be fulfilled. See Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2004), 289.

³⁷ American Psychiatric Association, DSM-V (Arlington: APA, 2013), 223.

³⁸ DSM-V, 223.

³⁹ DSM-V, 223.

⁴⁰ Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 76.

⁴¹ The History Chanel, *American Pickers*; <https://www.history.com/shows/american-pickers>

⁴² Eric S. Jenkins, "The Affections of the *American Pickers*: Commodity Fetishism in Control Societies," in *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 2015): 349. For Deleuze's concept, see Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," in *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7. According to Deleuze, whereas disciplinary societies exercised power over *individuals* via enclosed institutions and spaces, control societies exercise power over *individuals* via the mobility and ubiquity of debt.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Picador, 2010).

⁴⁴ David Lord Smail, "Neurohistory in Action: Hoarding in the Human Past," in *Isis*, Vol. 105: 120, 121.

⁴⁵ Will Oremus, "What Everyone's Getting Wrong about the Toilet Paper Shortage," *Medium* (2 April 2020); <https://marker.medium.com/what-everyones-getting-wrong-about-the-toilet-paper-shortage-c812e1358fe0>

⁴⁶ Žižek tells this story in numerous places, but see the quotation at https://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/279237/%C5%BDi%C5%BEek_Why_people_are_panic_buying_toilet_paper

⁴⁷ Brett Wysel, "Where did all the toilet paper go? The behavioral economics of hoarding." *Forbes* (17 Apr 2020); <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettwhysel/2020/04/17/where-did-all-the-toilet-paper-go-the-behavioral-economics-of-hoarding/#212939de2d3d>

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism" in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX (1906-1908), ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959). 173-4

⁴⁹ Kaitlin O'Cain, "Iowa man used his secret fortune to send 33 strangers to college" *CBS News* (24 July 2019); <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dale-schroeder-iowa-man-used-secret-fortune-to-send-strangers-to-college-2019-07-24/>

⁵⁰ Will Hobson and Roxanne Roberts, "What the fifty richest Americans have given to COVID-19 relief" *The Washington Post* (4 June 2020); https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-the-50-richest-americans-have-given-for-covid-19-relief/2020/06/02/bb70b94c-9a10-11ea-ac72-3841fcc9b35f_story.html

⁵¹ Quoted in McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 282.

⁵² McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 240.

⁵³ McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 246.