

## HOUSE ORGAN

### Imperial Blues

At the close of the Second World War the United States of America, having achieved the enviable status of becoming the most powerful country in all of history, proclaimed itself a full-blown empire by naming the next century after itself. Projecting enormous force over its ruined enemies and exhausted allies (including the U.S.S.R., the ally on its way to becoming an enemy), with mastery over death-dealing technology (including the supreme instance of nuclear weaponry), and propelled by stupendous growth in the forces of production thanks to mobilization for war, the Great Democratic Power took over the cockpit of a global capitalism cleared out and ready to expand after the grim 1930s.

#### Comparative Empireology: The Case of Rome

Comparing empires is in some ways a fool's game, but it has its uses. In any case, the empire that springs to my mind as most akin to that of the United States is that of Rome, inaugurated in 27 BCE with the coronation of Octavian as Augustus. For all the differences, there is something in the "spirit" of Rome that matches the American version for aggressivity, grandeur, universal claim, and sheer dynamism. Although neither actually ruled the entire world, both Rome and the United States projected an image of global dominion. They secured their rule by brute military superiority, a system of communication (roads in the case of Rome, advanced telecommunications for the U.S.), economic instruments that bound the periphery to the center, and a powerful cultural apparatus that made the empire's rule seem benign, progressive, and inevitable through conjunction of the regime of force with strong spiritual claims—a combination that, oddly enough, both denied and propelled an extreme appetite for conquest.

Rome did so by making the emperor into a god and controlling the populace around this theme through skilful application of the device of spectacle.<sup>1</sup> The emperor-god did not rule through ideological supremacy; indeed, Rome achieved a reputation for tolerance in the religious sphere. He was, rather, the head of a regime of exceptional cruelty, even by the standards of the ancient world; and his deification was transferred into the spectacle of suffering as a means of social control. This entailed taking the existing model of crucifixion—a highly visible spectacle in which the death of miscreants was gruesomely displayed in slow motion (hence the expression, "excruciating detail")—and expanding it into the production of entertainments involving ritual sacrifice of life on an unprecedented scale. Set in amphitheaters specially constructed for the purpose and financed by the personal funds of the emperors and ruling classes, Rome's death culture was built upon the viewing of mass murder of "wild" (for civilization always means the taming of what is deemed wild) animals, gladiators, and for a considerable time, Christians. Thousands of living creatures could be sacrificed on such occasions, which were tightly administered to bind the spectators to the imperial order. Indeed, the emperor got his money's worth, for the

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<sup>1</sup> The notion was made famous by Guy DeBord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995 [1967]). Though DeBord did not take up the spectacle in Rome in this work, nor, so far as I know, elsewhere, the basic principle applies to imperial Rome, which may be said to have been the first society in which the spectacle comes into fruition.

spectacular games transferred deification to imperial society itself. As Brigitte Kahl has observed:

By exhibiting the frightening image of the *other-than-us* at the center, and by staging the Great Combat, the arena not only exposed but also veiled, covered, softened with its bloody sand all the deadly tension, violence and injustice that in reality were at the core of Roman society itself. It transformed privileged and non-privileged members into a common Roman subjectivity of one-self, lifting up even the lowest ranking members of the plebs, the socially others inside society, by putting them above someone lower—the outcast other dying in the arena. It also justified and purified the audience by defining them as Not-other, that is, not lawless, not uncivilized, not barbarian, not seditious—and therefore not doomed to die. None of these operations of exorcism, purification, and justification could have been performed without visually consuming the blood of the other.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Great American Democracy as the Mysterious Spectacle of Capital**

Of course we have come a long way from the ponderous brutality of Roman culture, what with fabulous technology, many innovations such as rating systems G to X, and humane taboos against actually killing an actual living being on screen (note the movie disclaimers to this effect), not to mention, in public. There is no way here to take up the complexity of the modern cultural apparatus—including the space within it for cultures of resistance. We would only paraphrase Brigitta Kahl: that under its aegis “the deadly tension, violence and injustice that in reality [are] at the core of [late capitalist] society itself” takes the form of simulations, turns into fun and games, escapes from the awful grind of reality, and becomes spread over hundreds of theme parks and channels, innumerable websites, and untold numbers of electronic game-boards and screens on which the screams of the victims and the shouts of the victors sound forth under the watchful gaze of the audience counters, number-crunchers, and people-movers, who give thumbs up or down to the advertisers and the giant corporate interests behind them according to the degree of commodification achieved. There are more than enough mock deaths and humiliations to suit any taste, car crashes, and the NFL to satisfy the atavistic desire for gladiatorial combat, abundant “stars” to be adored or shocked by, and, above all, never any threat that reality will intrude in an integral form outside the domain of entertainment.

The central insight of critical media studies is that of the Canadian scholar Dallas Smythe, who observed that the key products of the cultural industries are audiences to be sold to sponsors and advertisers.<sup>3</sup> The emperor in this case does not need to watch directly, as his deification is no longer at issue. Nor does imperial power reside with the advertisers and giant corporate interests, although they are closer to the deity than anyone else—indeed, they are the High Priests of its Temple. For god has been displaced under capitalism to the domain of Value itself, which attaches itself to the real things of this world through the fetish of the commodity and sets them in motion in the cause of that infinite expansion Marx recognized to be the “Moses and the prophets” of the capitalist system.

There is no love in this deity, and its culture is even more one of death than that of Rome. The reign of exchange value/money/capital yanks and unmoors all that is passing or

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<sup>2</sup> Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981).

past and leads to what the *Communist Manifesto* called the “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and anxiety” that characterize our epoch, where ecosystems are disintegrated daily and countless species vanish before they are known to exist. Under these circumstances, religion loses its integrity and becomes defensive, giving meaning to a world whose real god is cold as any stone, a calculating and ungenerous god, bleak beyond belief. This deity, Moloch-like in rapacity and cruelty, sets the basic terms. The cultural apparatus rounds off the edges while itself undergoing “uninterrupted disturbance,” a process that rewards uncertainty and anxiety, because to do so stimulates the appetite for commodities. The corrosive effect of capitalist culture causes faith to collapse and also perverts a great deal of religion into fundamentalism. Thus the spiritually barren choice before us is between a postmodernism that empties existence of meaning on one hand, and on the other, a fortress-like retreat into a false certainty.

The primacy of the economic is the salient distinction between empires. Rome seemed bored by the problem of production, inasmuch as its wealth could be largely gained through direct conquest and plunder. Military preponderance enabled the direct plunder of peripheral societies, a labor force through the acquisition of slaves, the cruel disciplining of peasants and plebians, and the spectacular and degenerate violence of Roman public culture. It was an awful picture, with innumerable bad side effects.<sup>4</sup> But it lacked what is driving the present empire to ruin, namely, the foregrounding of the capitalist economic system as the supreme and totalizing power in society. Rome pretended to universality; but this was essentially the incremental extension of innumerable instances of invasion and domination. Each colony reacted individually under the aegis of the emperor god; hence the final verdict of Rome’s depredation is that it was an immense aggregate of use values of greater or lesser realization, the corruption of which eventuated in the widespread but rather slow disintegration of the empire itself.

The United States has been in substantive control of global capitalism since 1945, and in this sense must be blamed for its depredations, including the present crisis. But from another angle, it is like the rider of a runaway horse suffering from the illusion that the beast is under his control because he sits in the saddle. Capital derives from the monetization of reality as value. This provides the imperial mentality with satisfaction of its desires for wealth and power. But it also places empire on a path of endless and fundamentally chaotic expansion, not of territory, nor of use values, but of value itself, dragging reality behind it. This essential feature reflects back onto the mentality of empire. Unlike imperial Rome, where direct acquisition of material wealth could suffice, the empire of capital can set no limits. It is by its inner nature de-territorialized even though administered by real people who live in territories such as nation-states and hold nationalist aspirations. Accordingly, as its crises of accumulation and ecological decay grind on, so does its political/cultural system—long the glue holding the ecumene together—begin to fall apart and become more and more bizarre. Humpty-Dumpty seems indeed to be headed toward a great, and irreparable, fall. Two-thirds of the way into the Great American Century, there is no guarantee that the finish line will be reached. And if so, then what?

### **The First Coming; Can There Be a Second?**

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<sup>4</sup> See G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

Both empires depended upon spirituality for the purposes of consent, secured through a process of terrorization. For Rome, as Brigitte Kahl shows, to witness the spectacle was to join with the emperor-god in rejection of the sacrificed Other. For the American empire, the process is more subtle and diffuse. The plebian class is kept, as the *Communist Manifesto* put it, in the state of “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, [and] everlasting uncertainty and anxiety [which] distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.” The reaction to fear comprises the awesome power of cultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism and provides a false fortress of refuge from the terror without end produced by the capitalist market and rendered as spectacle through its culture industries. Once again there is an Other to be rejected and sacrificed, offered to the death god through the long list of sacrificial victims demonized, racially degraded, and served up by demagogues.

There have been exceptions to this pattern, the most notable of which occurred during the early years of the Roman empire. It was brought on by Rome’s colonization of the Eastern Mediterranean and its placement there of a sort of Jewish quisling regime under the Herods. Out of the destabilized society emerged many prophetic radicals, one of whom was a Jewish peasant who, in the words of his disciple Paul, embodied the principle that God would choose “what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.” (1 Cor 1:28). Great mountains of text have been devoted to the Jesus phenomenon, and I will not sort through them here. I will only say that, somehow, through the transmission of unconditional love, Jesus negated the fear at the center of the Roman death culture even as he entered into and negated the spectacle of crucifixion, affirming that he was the “resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” (John 11:25)<sup>5</sup>

It was but a momentary tear in the fabric of Roman domination, and three centuries later, after any number of Christian martyrs in the Amphitheatres, the faith became absorbed into the empire as its state religion.<sup>6</sup> This ushered in a story not to be recounted here, except to mention that it shows how ambivalent spirituality can be. Christianity, born as a movement from below and bearing universal values, became one of the great purveyors of terror, persecution and racism over the centuries. It has also provided shining examples of transcendent resistance. The key seems to be whether spirit is articulated in rejection of empire—in which instance we have seen in recent times, a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Martin Luther King Jr., an Oscar Romero, and a Lucius Walker,<sup>7</sup> among others—or whether it becomes empire’s servant.

I was reminded with special poignancy of this while watching the spectacular appearance of the notable psychopath Glenn Beck (Sarah Palin looking on) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the 47th anniversary and at the same place as Martin Luther King

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<sup>5</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992); Richard A. Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: Grosset Putnam, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). For martyrdom, see pp. 419-492.

<sup>7</sup> Walker (1930-2010) was no martyr, but a minister in the black Baptist church who undertook many notable missions, including leading material aid caravans across the boundaries of empire to blockaded Cuba. Most recently he was helping to train international brigades of physicians from black and Latino communities. I went on one of his “Pastors for Peace” caravans, in 1994, and am still trying to absorb its message.

Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. For the thousandth time one wondered whether anything was sacred any more, and for the thousandth time the answer came back: "guess not." A crowd of 300,000 people were there, many bused in by Beck's media machine. All the folk I saw looked lost and searching. Many of them called out for Jesus, and for guidance in the midst of our empire's slow, fitful collapse. They were grateful to Beck for the event and the moment of hope it gave them; but nobody looked dumb enough to be actually inspired by him. They were just waiting, and soon they would return to their homes, or what was left of them.

Although most Marxists have been too steeped in the spirit-corrosive that is capitalist culture to recognize the fact, the tradition whose name they bear is the direct offspring of that started into motion by the aforesaid Jewish peasant.<sup>8</sup> This discourse is currently in eclipse. Given both the necessity of Marxism for coming to grips with the crises of capital and its empire, along with its inability to generate transformative social movements of sufficient faith to move this mountain, it would seem that the time to awaken and recover this root has come.

—Joel Kovel

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<sup>8</sup> *Marx and Engels on Religion*, Intro. Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Schocken, 1964). A very large literature develops this theme. Two titles of importance are Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken, 1968); and José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx against the Marxists* (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980 [originally *El cristianismo de Marx*, 1978]).