The Persistence of Purgatorial time

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Abstract
This paper takes Richard Fenn’s treatment of the writings of the 17th century Divine, Richard Baxter to illustrate the cultural influence of the invention of Purgatory on capitalist relations to time; specifically abstract time in labour. The argument differs from that offered by Max Weber in the Protestant Ethic where he used Baxter’s texts to highlight the importance of work as vocation and the justification of the pursuit of profit for the 17th century merchant and artisan class. Weber’s account suggests that the Protestant ethic represented a decisive break with the past, and hence made way for new relations of production. Fenn’s account illustrates a more gradual transformation whereby the cultural origins of abstract time in labour are found firstly in the doctrine of purgatory, and then transformed into the Protestant ethic and later accepted as the norm in secular and capitalist consciousness.

Introduction: The Protestant Ethic and The Persistence of Purgatory
The relationship between religious ideas and capitalism has been explored by a number of social and historical commentators (Kitch 1967; Giddens 1971), the most famous being Max Weber's Protestant Ethic. In the Protestant Ethic Weber argued for an elective affinity between the capitalist need for workers who saw the benefits of hard work and the re-investment of profits back into the enterprise, and the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. This doctrine is assumed to have transformed Christian attitudes to poverty and wealth, encouraged workers to disciplined and frugal habits, inserted
work as the primary vocation, and the accumulation of profit as evidence of Divine favour. Behind these assumptions is the idea that the shift from pre-capitalist to capitalist modes of, and relations to production, required a radical break in the motivations for social action. An alternate view offered by Richard Fenn (1995) in his book *The Persistence of Purgatory* suggests that the groundwork for capitalist relations to working time were well on the way to being established before Calvin's doctrine of predestination took hold in the protestant imagination. These ideas can be found in the 13th century invention of Purgatory.

In popular Roman Catholic theology Purgatory is a place of extreme sadomasochistic punishment where the dead work off the debt of past sins until they are fit for heaven. It is clearly distinguished from Heaven, Hell or Limbo (the place of the unbaptised, but virtuous), and far more deserving than Limbo as a metaphor for marginality. While in contemporary Catholic theology it is passed over in silence as a place that has not only gone out of fashion, but probably never existed, its modern day remnants can be found in November 2nd; All Souls Day. This annual event for ascetical acts of piety was established in 1024 by the monks at Cluny, a religious order founded to pray for the souls of the wealthy classes, who wished to include the peasants in their yearly quota of souls released from Purgatory (Le Goff 1981).

Of course Purgatory was 'invented' well before the 13th century. However, Fenn (1995), drawing on the work of Le Goff (1981) points to the increasing popularity of Purgatory in the Roman Catholic Church particularly amongst the laity in the three centuries prior to the Reformation. He suggests that it was not that the merchant class invented Purgatory, but rather an idea that already existed was modified and made more popular because it was functional. The functional use of Purgatory was that it provided time post death, to work off spiritual debts incurred as part of one's engagement in the social world, particularly tainted occupations such as usury, banking and trade. Prior to the 'invention' of Purgatory the ideal for many wealthy merchants had been to spend their last years in monasteries responding to the biblical call to sell all they had and give to the poor; or, if this was too high an ideal, to give much of it to charity. The appropriation of the idea of Purgatory by the merchant class enabled money to be conserved within the family, with only some put aside for prayers, the giving of alms, and that ultimate spiritual commodity; Indulgences. Restitution for sins of usury and other tainted occupations could now be done post mortem, legally through the Will, through a process analogous to accounting and in a time and a space called Purgatory\(^1\). Purgatory provided the insurance and assurance of a second chance, with payments time-tabled to occur after death, leaving time this side of death for more secular pursuits (Fenn 1995).

Fenn (1995) suggests that the increased popularity of Purgatory between the 11th and 13th centuries was a necessary pre-condition for the capitalist ca-

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\(^1\) While the official Church was redoubling its condemnation of usury at the Second, Third and Fourth Lateran Councils in 1139, 1179 and 1215 (Le Goff 1981), by the end of the 12th century, ambiguity over the Mosaic prohibitions against usury were so ambiguous that 'Christian usurers were outstripping the Jews and well on their way to becoming an international menace (Nelson 1969:7).
pacity to make money simply for its own sake and for the creation of surplus value. Before the invention of Purgatory, the medieval pre-occupation with the future focused on either the imminent coming of the Antichrist indicating the end of the world or was directed towards the social movement of millenarianism which heralded a new world order where democracy and Franciscan-like communalism and holy poverty prevailed. Both views prevented the development of material accumulation and the psychological preconditions necessary for the development of capitalism: profit for its own sake and the creation of surplus value.

Two other important characteristics were embedded in Purgatory. The first was the medieval sense of community and kin; the second was the beginning of the modern idea of reflexivity and individualism. Purgatory provided a detachment from the past; both in terms of one’s own faults and one’s kin, but it linked individuals to their kin through a sense of mutual interdependence and risk management. The faithful were able to perform acts of asceticism and denial in order to reduce not only their own time in purgatory, but also those of past loved ones. All this could be done within a rational system of ascetical practices divorced from secular pursuits. The reflexivity that emerged from purgatory was bolstered by the theological discussions over types of sins: venial or mortal. The invention of venial or minor sins in effect required the invention of purgatory and the establishment in 1215 of obligatory yearly confession required that both the clergy and the population be educated on how to examine their conscience (Le Goff 1981). Such mental practices were reminiscent of book-keeping and accounting, although it would be incorrect to suggest that purgatory and yearly confessions led to book-keeping, rather they are a reflection of a new set of cultural ideas that found expression both in the invention of secular pursuits such as accounting, and in mystical and magical venues such as Purgatory.

However the time spent in Purgatory did not directly equate with time on earth, or with the amount of time purchased through Indulgences despite attempts by various Popes to make full claim to dominion over its many mountains and vales (Bagchi 1991). The time required of the soul in Purgatory was not concrete or predictable, but abstract and unstable. According to Dante, the fire of Purgatory was the soul engaged in neurotic and obsessive-compulsive acts of re-visiting past sins (Dante 1973). The act of suffering was the realisation that one’s time there was incessantly re-determined back to its previous value despite the endless days spent in acts of restitution (Fenn 1995). In summary, Purgatory had three time dimensions. These were the suffering of penitents who had no control over their time; the faithful (and unfaithful) on earth working assiduously and anxiously to reduce their time in Purgatory; and the official church claiming triumphantly to control time spent in Purgatory (Fenn 1995).

Richard Fenn and the purgatorial complex
Using psychoanalytic language Fenn’s (1995) analysis of the consequence of the invention of Purgatory goes beyond the suggestion that it offered hope of salvation for those engaged in commercial ventures such as usury or trade,
to suggesting that it sowed the seed for what he refers to as a *purgatorial complex* in the social character of Western secular societies, particularly in America. This is an exquisite relationship to time in work and everyday life characterised by anxiety that produces individuals who have disciplined, reflexive and calculating habits of work, along with a magical notion that time can be tamed through personal improvement and increased effort at time management\(^2\). Fenn uses the writings of 17th century Divine, Richard Baxter as the historical turning point between the medieval notions of Purgatory as the time beyond death, to the Protestant, and eventually secular construction of time anxiety in the present.

**Richard Fenn on Baxter and the Persistence of Purgatory**

For Fenn’s Baxter all life was Purgatory. Being on earth was the violent self-imposed trial the soul endured in a future poised midway between heaven and hell now referred to as ‘in the meantime’ (Fenn 1995: 68). Fenn’s Baxter encouraged his audience to live as if they were about to die, always keeping the end in sight as if the deadline was just before them. He urged the faithful ‘to live as though this is the moment of ... death....Be ready to die and you are ready for anything....Ask your hearts seriously, what is it that I shall need at a dying hour? And let it speedily be got ready and not be to seek in time of your extremity’ (Baxter cited in Fenn 1995: 68).

Embedded in his teaching is also the seed of a detachment from work; work should be performed well, but it should not distract the soul from the future goal. It is simply the means to the Future. As Fenn (1995:75) notes, Baxter’s teaching on the work ethic were qualified with the exhortation that his followers ‘Be ever watchful redeemers of your time, and make conscience of every hour and minute’. For the present is full of unseen forces that made the time precarious: in effect a purgatorial time whereby the world is re-enchanted and the soul, now dead to the world uses it only in the interest of God’s project.

Salvation is achieved through a self-reflexive self-mastery, primarily exercised through work; but with the focus spent on time well spent, not on the meaning embedded in the task. For Baxter writes; ‘Others will trifle away the time in delays, and promise this day and the next, but still keep off from the doing of the business but those with their eye on the clock will do it now’ (Baxter cited in Fenn 1995: 68). Certainty of the now absent Protestant God is necessary, but doubt drives the soul on. For time, itself is now to be redeemed: ‘To redeem Time is to see that we cast none of it away in vain; but use every minute of it as a most precious thing, and spend it wholly in the way of duty...’ (Baxter cited in Fenn 1995: 75). Baxter’s Christians are unsure of themselves, scrupulous and disciplined, but also reflexive individuals who incessantly re-make themselves through redeeming/saving their time.

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\(^2\) Fenn traces these development by examining Dante’s construction of Purgatory in the Divine Comedy, John Locke’s treatment of the ‘punctual self’, the writings of the American evangelical preacher Canning, and Charles Dickens reflections on the frontier as the ‘eternal foreground’ or the secular purgatorial landscape of the new world.
Purgatorial time as a precursor to abstract time

Fenn’s treatment of Baxter’s injunction to use time well, points to an underlying assumption that time itself can be controlled; that the pace of work can accelerate to meet time demands, and that individuals can regulate their lives according to the dictates of clocks, work schedules, timetables, rotations and audits. It is not simply work that now dominates everyday life, but time itself dominates. This time is not concrete or natured, but precarious, unstable and abstract. Abstract time differs from concrete time in that it is ‘uniform, continuous, homogeneous, “empty” time, ...independent of events’ (Postone 1996:202). It exists independently of any external measures such as the real time needed to perform and tasks and can be divided into ‘equal, non-qualitative and constant components’ (Postone 1996: 202) that can be cut up, controlled and edited (Adam 1995). Abstract time is very similar in measurement to time in purgatory. Translated into the world of work, abstract time becomes the time that must be given over to work in order to achieve the full value of ones’ labour. It is not the actual number of concrete minutes or days really needed to perform a task, (or to redeem one’s past sins) but the time allocated to these tasks through the multiplicity of workload formulas in places of production as diverse as factories, hospitals, universities or shops.

Abstract time is also an essential component of capitalist work relations ably outlined by Marx in his case study of the English hand-loom weavers when he wrote:

The introduction of power-loom into England, for example, probably reduced by one half the labour required to convert a given quality of yarn into a woven fabric. In order to do this the English hand-loom weaver in fact needed the same amount of labour-time as before; but the product of his individual hour of labour now only represented half an hour of social labour, and consequently fell to one half its former value (Marx 1976:129).

The contradiction within abstract time is that while it is assumed to be standard and invariable, mathematically precise and a true measure of the time needed to perform a task, it both changes and is static. As production increases, the value of the worker’s hour decreases, moving from a concrete value back to an abstraction. An hour is a constant measure of time in labour, yet with increases in productivity the value of the hour decreases and is redetermined once again back to an abstract value (Postone 1996). Postone uses the structural analogy of the worker on the treadmill to describe the part played by time in the production of ‘surplus value’; Fenn uses the psychological analogy of the purgatorial complex to describe our ready acceptance to work in order to achieve ‘surplus value’. In both cases, time is abstract.

Concluding discussion

Both Weber (1967) and Fenn (1995) used the writings of the 17th century Divine, Richard Baxter’s to demonstrate 19th and 20th century capitalism’s pre-
occupation with the future: Weber to outline the development of salvation anxiety as the ethical basis of capitalism, Fenn to track the transformation of the medieval innovation of Purgatory and consequent anxiety about time into a secular ‘purgatorial complex’ that predisposed souls to the acceptance of abstract time in work. Both accounts converge on providing an understanding of the social origins of a particular psychological relationship to time as a necessary accompaniment to capitalist work relations. However Weber’s interest is not specifically about time, but highlights those aspects of Baxter’s writings that support the Calvinist encouragement the pursuit of continuous renewed profits by rational means for the emerging merchant and artisan classes.

Where Weber is concerned to show how a set of religious ideas provided the necessary character traits for the development of capitalism, Fenn’s concern is to illustrate the development of time anxiety within capitalism in relation to work. Fenn’s account provides a cultural explanation for understanding why individual worker’s not only bow to the capitalist trickery whereby their time is constantly redetermined back to its previous value, but take on the personal burden of capturing time in order to achieve surplus value for the owner, manager or boss. There is of course considerable overlap of ideas between Weber and Fenn’s accounts, particularly the sadomasochism embedded in both Purgatory and the Protestant ethic, whereby the merchant is positioned as a masochist to a sadistic God who teases with the hope, but never the assurance of salvation. Time also plays a large part in Weber’s treatment of Baxter’s work, particularly the quotes he uses as examples of thrift as does his recognition of the importance of time prior to the Reformation, particularly in medieval monasticism (Weber 1967:261). However his argument explains how people work to simultaneously signify their salvation and make money, while Fenn’s interest is in understanding why ‘time’ became such serious business in capitalist culture. It is serious business because subjugation to surplus value is conditional on the dominance and acceptance of abstract time.

If Fenn’s treatment of the impact of Purgatory is legitimate it suggests that the shift from one economic mode to another was more gradual than Weber’s thesis allows. This is particularly so for the development of ascetical practices in everyday worklife, where time is constantly out of one’s control in its incessant redetermination back to a previous value. Even if both ideas represent parallel movements that only came together in the early 20th century when religious differences gave way to a single unitary socio-religious and then socio-secular society (Parsons 1965: xi ) the Purgatorial complex complements the Protestant work ethic, rather than being simply a quaint magical invention of the medieval period, or as Weber would have it, ‘one of the legalistic circumventions of all sorts’ invented in the medieval period to get round the prohibition against usury (Weber 1965:219) . Weber misunderstands the importance of the institutionalisation of sacramental confession following the invention of purgatory when he suggests it allows for atomization in moral obligations- sins can be dispensed with one by one so that there need not develop an integrated and total moral pattern of life. (Parsons 1965: liii). Purgatory became the catalyst for the codification and systemati-
zation of sins that ensured total ethical action. However the possibilities of life after the deadline, of future salvation beyond the grave also allowed some merchants to take the risk, but more importantly it allowed most souls to develop the ascetical relationship to working time and a moral acceptance and piety so necessary for abstract time in capitalism.

References


