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Wealth versus Money in Pentecost

Why Is Money Good?

Knut Rio

This book builds a case and an argument that deserves a lot of attention – notably about the particular observation that the people in 'Pentecost' invest in notions of productivity, life and circulation. We have understood from the text above that the people in 'Pentecost' do not want to waste their time; they value work over ceremonies and they value sale over accumulation – and ultimately they value life over death. I think there is one particularly interesting notion at play here; that death in itself seems to be associated with a form of unhealthy and dangerous accumulation.

Hence, I would like to follow on from Michelle MacCarthy's materials from the Trobriand Islands 'neighbourhood' of 'Pentecost' and try to go a little deeper into the relation between our concepts of 'wealth' and 'distribution' – two concepts that are absolutely central to contemporary global movements.

The concept of wealth in English comes out of a notion of wellbeing and strength. This is different from French or German or Norwegian, where we have *rikdom* ('richdom') like *richesse* in French and *reichtum* in German. Through these words, words for royal riches in continental Europe and wellbeing in the United Kingdom, we can imagine that wealth was always related to power and the estate – and the royal management of it. The concept of wealth was simply the basis of the aristocratic realm as a totality – and the wellbeing of the subjects to this realm – and did not have much currency apart from exactly that. Wealth as a concept was deeply entwined in the ontological status of the king

or chief and their relations towards the subjects of the realm. It had to do with a crucial cosmological notion of balance – as the riches were the substance holding the cosmos in place, so to speak, that provided the realm or estate and its subjects with wellbeing but also heavy bearings for centre and periphery and divine glory.

One of the historically most controversial and problematic messages in Christianity is the rejection of this concept of royal wealth. When people were waiting for Jesus they were indeed waiting for a king – but a different kind of king. A king not basing his kingdom on earthly, material wealth but *spiritual wealth*. In the Old Testament we read about the prohibition of ritual worship of a material nature and fetishism. In the well-known story of Exodus, a part of the Bible well rehearsed in Pentecost we can assume, Moses burnt the golden calf in a fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on water and made his followers the Israelites drink the mixture; to make the point that wealth was not something to worship as a power in itself. The followers of Moses killed around three thousand worshippers of the pre-Christian god of Baal, who had been misled by this figure of wealth. In the archaeological materials and written tablets there are references to Baal that bring this mythological corpus in relation to other mythologies of the area – including the Bible – related to a cult of fertility, of water and floods of the rivers Euphrat and Tigris, and a control of nature. Baal was the god of riches and beauty, the storm god, associated with lightning and the mountain, and the burning tree and the bull were his symbols. Historians have connected the rituals of fertility in Ugarit to the Palestinian cult of Tammuz, and Baal is also associated with the *Song of Songs* in the Hebrew Bible (see Fisher and Knutson 1969). But for Moses, and for later interpreters of the Bible up until today, Baal was the image of a false god, a devil who betrayed man through his seducing appearance, and in Europe he later reappeared as Beelzebub – 'the god of flies' that always figured in medieval witch-hunts. The issue of worship should be a matter between the Christians and God and not through a mediator of wealth – like Baal or an Emperor. In the New Testament this is taken one step further, since Jesus renounces wealth and hierarchy altogether as the basis for Jewish society. Jesus taught that one should use one's financial resources to help the poor and needy through benevolence. He claimed that one should not depend upon one's resources but upon God as the source of supply. One should invest one's wealth in the lives of others and not hoard resources to ourselves:

> Looking at his disciples, he said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be

> satisfied. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. (Luke 6:20, 21, 24, 25)

We find a lot of similar phrases rehearsed in Pentecostalist congregations and webpages – because this is something that concerns them a lot. And this has very much to do with what the authors are writing about in this book – that the people in Pentecost are concerned with wealth in a specific way.

Here is a little passage from a Pentecostal webpage – the Kingwatch.com:

> People who follow Jesus have a new King. This is important because a king owns all the property within his Kingdom. He will assign some property to his followers, but they will only hold it while they remain in his favour. People who opposed the king could have their property confiscated without compensation. The name of this practice is 'eminent domain'.
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> When Christians decide to 'seek the kingdom', all their possessions become the property of their new king. Giving a tenth of what they own is not an option. Everything they own now belongs to Jesus, and must be used as he directs … For modern Christians, seeking first the Kingdom means surrendering all our income and wealth to the Holy Spirit and using it as he directs. If he tells us to sell our property and give it away, that is what we must do. It no longer belongs to us, but to our king. If the Holy Spirit tells us to share our possessions, then we have no option … Many Christians respond to Jesus' teaching by asking, 'Can a Christian own property?' The New Testament answer is 'No'. Christians cannot own property. The reason we cannot own property is that we have a king. When we commit to Jesus, all our property belongs to him. We cannot own property, because we and everything we hold belongs to him. (http://kingwatch.co.nz/Christian_Political_Economy/jesus_on_money.htm)

What is clear from the Pentecostal webpages that I have visited is that in theory no person can own property, since everything belongs to Jesus and the kingdom of God. But they also emphasize that one can own property in order to look after it for Jesus. Hence all the wealth that the churches and pastors in Africa and Melanesia are raising is guarding it for Jesus but also putting it to use for the benefit of others.

We can interpret a lot of global movements from the bearings of this Christian history of wealth and distribution: from earlier times when wealth represented the glory and gravity of holy empires, to movements of revolution and renunciation of wealth, of destruction and iconoclasm. Wealth or money was never inherently evil for these Christians, but the corruption and selfish accumulation was always at the core of

Christian fears. Buying and selling, sharing and giving – the distributive aspects that we now call the economy – is at the core of a Christian ethos and being at the full attention of the Pentecostals – in the capacity of leading towards their kingdom.

I should also add that none of us can pretend that we escape this ethos of distribution. All of our notions of equality, of democracy, of market trade, of paying taxes, of nation-state distribution – these are all parts to this ethos. Capitalism as described by Marx in his three volumes, or indeed by Weber, is no doubt a Christian phenomenon. Christianity, in its very break with aristocratic forms of wealth and wealth as a source of governmental power, also opened up the path for capitalism. What we call capitalism is a system wherein accumulation is prohibited – at least in theory – and counterproductive to the system that is based on a free flow of labour and valuables. Marx in volume II of *Capital* is very clear that there is no such thing as 'fixed capital' in capitalism, and he was eagerly arguing against Smith and Ricardo on this point, since for Marx what they called 'fixed capital' was merely capital waiting to be exchanged or worked. In this way we can say that there can be no wealth, in the old meaning of the word, in capitalism, since everything must per definition be circulated, distributed and recycled by labour and production. Accumulated wealth does not any longer hold the cosmos in place and provide wellbeing, so to speak – it has instead become an image of corruption and anti-humanity. For the capital system accumulation or 'fixed wealth' is counter-effective and in a sense 'evil' if we translate the capitalist language into the Pentecostal. Fixed wealth is the enemy of the nation state and democracy (think about, for instance, the hidden wealth in Swiss banks or the way Google is hunted by France for its tax returns), and accumulation and uneven distribution of wealth is said to be the major political challenge in the twenty-first century. It is the major evil for capitalism and for Christians alike because accumulating wealth is unproductive, it is dirty and it does not create work and meaningful lives for people.

As outlined by the authors in Chapter 5, to pin all of these things down to a narrative about neoliberalism or occult economies derails our attention from an important social dynamic – notably a dynamic of perpetual conflict between distribution and accumulation. This is a key point in the Bible but also a key point for Marx' *Capital*. This problem reappears in Jean and John Comaroff's criticism of neoliberalism in Pentecost (2001). In their view capital is evil because it accumulates and oppresses, and this is translated or highlighted by the African 'occult economies', where, for instance, witches force people to work or give blood. The witches base their power on the accumulation of human

blood or vitality, just like global capitalism accumulates, in essence, human relations of production. The bottom line of their argument is that the economic mode produces the ideological mode; thus Pentecostalism becomes the religion of neoliberalism (in that order).

I cannot say too much about neoliberalism here – it is mainly just a derogatory term for laissez-faire economic governance, a weak state and free market fundamentalism. But it must be noted in extension to the Comaroffs' point that the critique of neoliberalism is also an important feature of the system that is neoliberalist; the critique belongs inside neoliberalism and should be added to its definition. And what I mean by its critique is mainly that it might create corruption, new forms of accumulation and inequality and a return to aristocratic forms of wealth. Neoliberalism comes with its own forms of critique, so to speak.

My point here is just the opposite from the Comaroffs' point. The distributive mode was all the time Christian, and it only became capitalist during the big breaks with landed aristocracy in Europe. Capitalism became the economic system of the Christian religion, and not vice versa, and the attack on royal glory and monarchy followed from this movement. When the modern nation states emerged in the late nineteenth century, with labour movements, with parliamentary democracy and bourgeois or corporate businesses at the heart of the system – the perpetual struggle was crowned with the victory over 'fixed property' – i.e. an 'occult economy' of sorts – directed against aristocracy, powerful estates and kinship. The fear was always that the capitalist system would fall back to a system of accumulation and feudalism. This is explicitly stated by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* after the Paris revolution of 1848 – but also again and again being argued up until today. Distribution is good; accumulation is evil – capital is good; wealth is evil.

Here we have our bearings, so to speak. It is with capitalism that the promise for freedom, equality, redistribution and labour arises, and that is the paramount value of modern revolutionary western society – as demonstrated quite clearly in Dumont's book *Homo Equalis* (see Dumont 1977). Wealth and accumulation is the suppressed value in this system that instead upholds distribution, if we can put it like that – such that accumulation becomes the impure and distribution the pure, in a Dumontian value axis.

The authors pointed out that the reason that (some) Trobrianders wanted to join the territory of 'Pentecost' was linked to two different things. The first was in 'a response to rampant sorcery deaths and the inability of mainline religion to combat such evil forces'. The other was related to a heightened sense of productivity, of modernity and progress in terms of modern technologies and infrastructure like electricity and

roads, for instance. They wanted to leave behind a life where they were merely wasting time on backward-looking rituals and dirty heaps of unproductive banana leaf bundles.

I think we can place the idea of sorcery into the logic of an ongoing war between distribution and accumulation. In fact, sorcery beliefs are exactly expressing themselves around the issues of selfishness and envy. The sorcerer or witch is a figure who is envious of other people's property – and all material items are marked by the gaze of the witches as their property. They desire it and they want to take it. To take it, possess it and consume it. MacCarthy (2017) also notes that it is taboo for the witch to own a broom and coconut husks used for cleaning pots and pans and making the cooking fire. The broom is what the good women use to sweep the homestead and the kitchen utensils are their way of reproducing their household. Productive work and exchange is assumed to be taboo for the witch. And another thing is that witches block people's consciousness; by creating delirium or forgetting, and symptoms of sorcery are often the lack of clear, rational thought. Clarity of mind, work, production and social relations of inter-village marriage is in total what the witch obstructs. This is what, the authors suggest, the Trobriand example says life is about in Pentecost.

And they do not want to waste time on death. I find the abandonment of the famous banana leaves and mortuary ceremonies intriguing in this respect. Doba is a physical expression of the matrilineage, as we were told by Annette Weiner (1976); it is women's wealth but also their value – it represents the mother's milk of the clan, collected and given away in great quantities. It was given by women who were close matrilineal kin of the deceased to his or her principal affines in payment for their onerous services in mourning the deceased. What could possibly be the problem with this – if we place it inside our 'distribution is good' vs 'accumulation is evil' dynamic? Why does doba become undesirable in Pentecost? This used to be the main work of women. The work resulted in heaps and heaps of bundles that could be exchanged and distributed. Why is not this work and distribution good? Now they are 'dirty' and 'a waste of time' – what does that mean?

Of course, the material quality of banana leaf bundles is such that they actually decompose and have a short life. They are made of dead leaves, in contrast with the mats that the Pentecostals prefer making – which are always made anew with fresh dyes and thereafter sold and exchanged for money and quickly move out of sight. The thousands of banana leaf bundles must end up as a massive heap of garbage in the villages. They must be burnt at some point or discarded through yet more unproductive work.

By contrast money has the material quality of not decomposing but simultaneously not accumulating, since it must be spent again and again. The doba has this particular quality of accumulating, it being stored in someone's house in readiness for the mortuary happening and after that taking up space and rotting away. But more importantly (in relation to my interest here) doba seems in another sense also to be *wealth more than capital*. It is grounded in the clan; it is the spirit of the *dala* matrilineage and hence when lying there in big bundles on the ceremonial ground they are materializing the spiritual 'occult economy power' of the lineage. And the essence of the lineage does not circulate; it is rooted in the land and held down by the heaviness of big stones and the yam houses, as we know from the ethnography. You see, I am trying to push the idea that it *must* be opposed in 'Pentecost' because it is a form of power that is not open, not distributed, not productive but rooted in the past, in the land, in the lineage as a spiritual being and in the cult of ancestors and death.

The Pentecostals do not pretend to think neoliberalism or capitalism is evil, exploitative and wrong – like the Comaroffs or western leftists. On the contrary they uphold capitalism as an ultimate ideal (if capitalism is what we call the distributive movement of keeping everything productive and laborious) and so they instead express the idea that it is the lineage, the doba, the ancestors and death that is evil (or, at least, unproductive and ungodly).

The critique of neoliberalism by western leftists is equally aimed towards corruptions and unfair accumulation as the critique by Pentecostals. And in many ways the critique of neoliberalism and the Pentecostal critique are exactly symmetrical. They both want a productive economy, they want everyone to take part, they want production and labour, they want redistribution and they want the poor to be lifted out of their misery. They want brotherly love, peace, freedom and equality. They attack any sign of unfair accumulation, returns to aristocratic arrangements, landed wealth as (in the doba case) or corruptions of relations between people (by witches).

By simple calculus the critiques of neoliberalism and the Pentecostals have shared concerns about the modern condition. It is not that Pentecostalists become neoliberalist because they join a church – as the Comaroffs hint at. The world of 'Pentecost' is already neoliberalist. Rather, different movements in 'Pentecost' partake in different ways in its critique and its control. The Comaroffs merely express the morality of neoliberalism – from within 'Pentecost', so to speak – a critique that is in every way internal to it and instrumental for it (yes, the Comaroffs are also in 'Pentecost'!).

As stated in Chapter 5, by embracing 'productivity' one can become part of a global community, which presents both an opportunity and a responsibility to make 'good' use of one's time, to move forward and to be more modern and developed. In this system death is the end point for all distributional horizons. It smells, it decays and it is there as a wasteful presence. A focus on life instead of death, then, means a focus on ensuring material wellbeing and spiritual wholeness in the here and now and looking to the future rather than the past.

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