

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



**Eugene McCarragher, The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019)**

Alvin Finkel

Volume 87, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078659ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0013>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Finkel, A. (2021). Review of [Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 87, 205–207. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0013>

urban development. Wilt examines the growing dangers of data collection for tech-surveillance and the already-existing over-policing of public transit, exposing how little control over data users currently possess, and makes the case that public safety is best addressed through the provision of services and resources – not an expanded surveillance and carceral state.

The discussion of rural and intercity transit service complements Wilt's refusal to abandon the suburbs. While rural areas have long suffered from disinvestment and neglect under neoliberal governance, Wilt counters with a vision that includes rural public transit provision. Sketching out how very feasible this transportation access would be, Wilt argues in favour of such investments on the grounds of equity. Workers, too, feature prominently, as it is their labour that the tech giants hope to automate out of existence. The precarious position of rideshare drivers is explored at depth, bringing attention to their substandard pay, and their work disciplined through unfair and arbitrary "gamified" evaluation systems. Wilt deems transit unions as key players in the fight against these eroding employment standards, and holds public transportation jobs as one of several that could provide necessary employment to just transition efforts.

A welcome emphasis is made throughout the text on the constructive and positive role organized rank-and-file citizens, transit users and union members can have on policy changes. This emphasis on the attainable and empowering aspects of organizing are important for readers desiring to wage similar campaigns in their own locales. Some detail, however, could have been developed regarding the hostile jurisdictional infrastructure that continues to separate fiscal capacity (at the national level) from service delivery (at the municipal level). This insulation

of money and markets from redistributive democratic pressures remains a key barrier to overcoming the politics of austerity.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars's* real strength is how forthright it is in making the issues political. Wilt presents rival visions for public transportation that are frankly antagonistic, plainly illustrating how allowing tech-giants to dictate the future will have the real effect of foreclosing possibilities of truly public and democratic transportation for people.

JOËL LAFOREST

University of Calgary

**Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019)**

I DID NOT EXPECT to enjoy this ridiculously lengthy (800 pages) tome which opens its critique of capitalism with an unapologetic theism that I found tedious. McCarragher writes that he sees the earth as "a sacramental place, mediating the presence and power of God, revelatory of the superabundant love of divinity." (11) I have little interest in religion and less in McCarragher's exploration of the ways in which many people seek not just a relationship with a God figure but "enchantment," that is constant evidence of God's presence and guiding hand in their lives. In the end, while my own materialist thinking remained intact, I was won over to McCarragher's view that capitalism and Christianity have become so entwined that it is not unfair to say that capitalism has become a religion.

This is a thoughtful, beautifully written book, tracing the ways in which the values of capitalism – greed, productivity, competition, selfishness – became confounded with notions of divinity, and

of God's plan for and involvement in the lives of the divinity's alleged favourite creation. Relying on a vastness of sources, this book demonstrates, at least in idealist or discourse terms, better than anything I've read, the history of the selling of capitalist ideas and values over a number of centuries to those seeking to merge their lives into what they came to believe as God's plan for them. While its focus is very heavily on the United States, much of what is argued here is applicable across much of the world.

The anti-capitalist values that McCarraher espouses – community, equality, a sharing of labour and its products – are common to those of many humanist Marxists and Marx himself in works such as *Grundrisse*. Still, McCarraher is determined, though often quoting Marx favourably, to dismiss Marx's materialism and his opposition to religion as just another form of "the enchantments of Mammon," the cult of progress and the belief in humans' mastery over nature rather than oneness with the forces in the natural world that McCarraher favours.

McCarraher examines the writings of hundreds of political theorists and literary figures, both apologists and critics, who have dealt with questions of what fundamental values can be found in capitalist societies and how they are sacralized so that the pursuit of material advantage over others becomes highly praised and emulated. Some of his arguments are similar to those of Max Weber who regarded the Protestant ethic as the basis for capitalism's hegemonic successes. Those who could achieve monetary successes became in their own eyes and those of other believers likely members of "the elect" whom God had predestined to become residents of a heaven that had limited space.

But Weber, like others, viewed the development of capitalism as a force that

replaced notions of "enchantment," a divinity's presence in our daily lives and in all that we experience and see, with stifling rationality. Capitalism became the substitute for religion and the wealthy became the authors of their own fortune. For McCarraher, that's simply not the case. And so, for example, for the Puritans, God's hand was present in the design of the market, with riches being "promissory notes of grace" and profits "bills of credit from the transcendent realm of plenitude." (122–3)

Capitalism viewed positively as enchantment can be found in the writings of such American literary greats as Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson, once a Unitarian minister who had become skeptical about Christianity, saw around him and embraced and encouraged a moral universe in which a competitive economy was a sacramental economy where the accumulation of riches involved a form of ecstasy that would allow humans to unite with the spirits. He encouraged each individual to do his best (the assumption of most of these theorists that God was only speaking to guys seemed rather universal) to enrich himself and thereby to become a virtual god who could use his riches mystically to improve the world.

These apostles of capitalist enchantment gave little thought to the lives of slaves or industrial workers, simply assuming that the riches of the few would gradually improve the lives of the not very entitled many. To the extent that they gave any thought to subjects such as imperialism and colonization, again it was all part of God's plan to improve his creation via his chosen capitalist agents.

McCarraher regards the sacralization of capitalist values as an attack on the Christian tradition even if mostly carried out by those claiming to be ardent Christians. In his search for exemplars

who might inform efforts of revolutionaries today, he mainly extols those who represent "Romantic, sacramental radicalism." (674) His heroes include Gerard Winstanley, William Blake, and John Ruskin. I have no problems with that selection. But I think that McCarraher's American and Christian focus limits his willingness to explore human history for examples of the socialism that he craves outside of the ultimately disappointing instances of Soviet and Chinese authoritarianism in the name of communism that he disparages. There have been many successful societies where spiritual values and material sufficiency at rather low levels of accumulation proved more than compatible without anyone being a Christian. Virtually all pre-agricultural societies would qualify as places where the materialist-idealist split has little meaning. That's true as well of many agricultural societies, from the Inca to most of Africa before the European conquest, of India before the Aryan conquest, and of the Iroquoians. It is even true of some modern industrial societies such as Vienna in the period after World War I, in the Indian state of Kerala, and in communist Cuba and socialist Bolivia. The various socialist experiments of the early post-colonial period in Africa also deserve a sympathetic eye, though they were ultimately forcefully disabled by the far-reaching might of the American Empire. McCarraher's focus on idealism sometimes leads him astray when he moves away from analyses of various thinkers and discourse manipulators and discusses mass movements. He misinterprets the peasants' revolts of the late 14th century as efforts to re-establish communitarian feudal societies in which their masters and they had reciprocal obligations. In fact, that ideal of feudalism in which custom constrained feudal lords from dealing oppressively with serfs is refuted in studies that demonstrate that

with no legal apparatus in place to protect subordinates, they more often than not suffered from arbitrary actions by the lords. In the aftermath of the Black Death, the peasants played the major role in impaling a declining feudalism by taking advantage of labour shortages to force bidding wars for their labour among desperate landlords. The kings across Europe, anxious to find more income to fund ongoing wars, tried to tax the new wealth that peasants and town workers were accumulating. The peasants united in protest. But their radical demands had little to do with feudal ideals; they wanted to carve out their own rights within an emerging capitalist system, sometimes calling for confiscation of estates and the creation of peasant commonwealths of equal land-sharing.

These criticisms do not detract from my view that McCarraher offers an amazing catalogue of evidence of Western intellectuals' efforts, and later those of advertisers and show business, not just to glorify the capitalist system and its leading figures but to suggest the operations of divine enchantment throughout its operations.

The book's epilogue, which demonstrates that neo-liberal, anti-humanist developments are no surprise when one considers the evolution of capitalism and the values expressed by its partisans, is an especially masterful and jargon-free piece of writing. There is much in this book that helps explain the hegemony of capitalist ideas in societies where religion is important even when the material interests of the working class ought clearly to expose the depravity and, for the religiously-minded, the ungodliness, of capitalism as actually practised.

ALVIN FINKEL

Athabasca University