



Ascetic protestantism as fatal strategy: religious-economic conflict and the implosion of cultural value

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ABSTRACT

This article engages Jean Baudrillard's principles of hyperreality and fatal strategy, and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in comparative analysis. First, it defines hyperreality as the saturation of quality to the degree of antithesis and defines fatal strategy as the self-destructive hyperreality of a system of thought, behavior, or exchange. Then, it assesses Weber's work on ascetic Protestantism and the secularizing influence of capital. Proceeding from the definition of relevant concepts, this analysis finds that ascetic Protestantism is itself a fatal strategy, as it establishes the framework for an economic system that inevitably subverts its own religious foundations. This determination is crucial to the comparative interpretation of Baudrillard and Weber's thought; the identification of fatal strategy within the genesis of global network of capital broadens the principle's scope and clarifies hyperconsumption's proliferation within traditionally ascetic cultures.

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1. Introduction

In a 1986 interview with *Art Press*, Jean Baudrillard addressed his role among the French intelligentsia, his recent writing on American culture, and the study of aesthetics. When asked about the paradoxical relationship between “the puritanical religious foundation of the American people” and the primacy of mass consumption within American culture, Baudrillard responded,

I must admit that I still find the puritan center of such a world rather difficult to explain. What kind of metabolism can there be between the omnipresent puritan energy and the fantastic immorality of this society? It seems as if the puritan impulse swept away much of the symbolic ritual, the baroque apotheosis, of Catholicism. What one confronts then, is the pure play of forces, where signs rearrange themselves according to a different logic which we find difficult to understand. (Baudrillard 1993, 133–134)

It is the significance of the relationship between ascetic Protestantism and contemporary hyperconsumption that constitutes the basis of this analysis. This article's objective is simple: to demonstrate the Baudrillardian “fatal strategy” at the core of ascetic Protestantism as formulated by Max Weber, thereby reconciling asceticism and consumption's dichotomic opposition. This article's relevance is not restricted to the study of marketing, anthropology, economics, sociology, philosophy, religion, cultural criticism, or business administration, and therefore does not endeavor to position itself within the literature of those fields. Rather, it seeks to identify a fundamental contention within the currently dominant system of thought, behavior, and exchange, which is immediately applicable to those fields. As such, it bears greater similarity to an introductory treatise than specialized, discipline-specific analysis. It establishes a conceptual framework that may be applied to issues as

diverse as urban development patterns and the fabrication of national identity, which will be explored in subsequent analyses.

This inquiry will primarily engage the original work of Jean Baudrillard and Max Weber and will, in the explanation of their thought, prioritize the use of practical and accessible examples to elucidate subsequent argumentation. Fatal strategy and hyperreality are among the more complex and elusive aspects of Baudrillard's work, and due to the scope of this analysis' relevance, it cannot be assumed that its audience's expertise will be restricted to a particular discipline. Furthermore, although Baudrillard notoriously eschewed strict academic argumentation, this analysis employs a more disciplined approach to justify its claims. Although a more Baudrillardian narrative approach would certainly leave more room for complexity and ambivalence, *Ascetic Protestantism as Fatal Strategy* prioritizes clear argumentative progression, thereby constructing a firm and accessible foundation upon which more complex, ambiguous, and theoretical work can be constructed. Fundamentally, this analysis is a point of departure rather than a destination.

The preceding analysis will apply Baudrillard's principles of "hyperreality" and "fatal strategy" to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber's seminal work of economic history and social criticism. Weber's descriptions of ascetic Protestantism and the secularizing influence of wealth provide Baudrillard's work with indispensable historical context. Conversely, Baudrillard's work can be used to identify the vestiges of ascetic Protestantism in the present, establishing context in which Weber's observation of cultural secularization can be contemporarily understood. First, this analysis will define Baudrillard's principles of "hyperreality" and "fatal strategy" and summarize Weber's work on the theological principles of ascetic Protestantism and the secularizing influence of capital. The second section, proceeding from the definition of relevant terms, poses the central assertion of this analysis: *Since ascetic Protestantism creates the moral and social conditions necessary for the establishment of a capitalist economy that ultimately negates its own religious foundations, it necessarily qualifies as a fatal strategy*. Lastly, this analysis will consider the relationship's implications, applying it to Baudrillard and Weber's philosophies. Considered collectively, this analysis will clarify the self-destruction of capitalism's social and religious foundations and apply it to the current epoch of alienating mass-consumption.

1.1. Toward a definition of Baudrillardian hyperreality

Although it recurs elsewhere in his work, Baudrillard addresses the principle of hyperreality most succinctly in his 1983 book *Fatal Strategies*. In the book's opening chapter, "Ecstasy and Inertia", he writes,

Every trait thus raised to the superlative power, caught up in a spiral of redoubling – the truer than true, the more beautiful than beautiful, the realer than real – is assured of having an effect of vertigo independent of any content or quality of its own. This effect today tends to become our only passion. A passion for intensifying, for escalation, for an increase in power, for ecstasy – for any quality at all, provided that, ceasing to be relative to its opposite (the true to the false, the beautiful to the ugly, the real to the imaginary) it becomes superlative, positively sublime, as if it had absorbed all the energy of its opposite. (27)

The principle of hyperreality holds that a quality's antithesis is not its opposite, but its fullest realization (29–31). This idea is best understood through contextualization. Consider, for instance, the process of producing pornography, the pinnacle of hypersexuality (Chu 2012). Before the shoot, makeup artists and hairdressers augment the performers' appearance while technicians install lighting and sound equipment in predesignated filming locations. Once the process of augmentation is complete and the performers select their outfits from a stylistically curated wardrobe, photographers take "glamor shots", emphasizing the performers' surgically augmented qualities, which are used as advertisement materials. The director briefs the actors on the specific language of the script and they conduct interviews, which are distributed as exclusive supplementary material.

Then, actors perform in a series of carefully choreographed positions, as the director periodically recesses production to offer feedback and adjust camera angles.

While entirely bereft of legitimate sexuality, pornography paradoxically approaches the ultimate realization of sexuality: “hypersexuality contemporaneous with the hyperreal” (Baudrillard 2008, 30). Pornography commercializes sex and reduces it to the consumption of the signs of sexuality. It is but the hedonistic observation of interaction between symbolically related objects – the performers’ commodified reproductive organs. It is anti-sexual, and its hypersexual illusion is predicated upon the obfuscation of its production. Mirrors are removed from shooting scenes to conceal the cameras’ reflections; to reveal the monstrous amalgamation of lighting equipment and videographic apparatuses would subvert the suspension of disbelief and undermine the carefully engineered illusion of sexuality. Pornography, commodified hypersexuality, is more sexual than sex itself while retaining none of its authentic qualities. It is anti-sexual by virtue of its hypersexuality.

Hyperreality is demonstrated in violence through nuclear proliferation. Despite only having ever used two nuclear weapons against a hostile power, the United States military maintains an arsenal of approximately 3700 warheads (Kristensen and Korda 2022). Their destructive capability is all but indescribable; as early as 1952 the United States possessed a nuclear warhead seven hundred times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima (Carr 2021). Nuclear weapons possess a destructive capacity so devastating that they dissociate themselves from their catastrophic capability. Even small “tactical” nuclear weapons designed for specialized battlefield implementation may be prohibitively destructive. In an article for *Defense One*, former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry wrote, “Fundamentally, it is unlikely that there is such a thing as a limited nuclear war, and preparing for one is folly” (Perry and Collina 2021). Even the use of tactical nuclear weapons could provoke the escalatory deployment of massive strategic warheads (Colby 2018). Useful for deterrence and extinction, nuclear weapons are reduced to self-referential symbols as they absorb the qualities of their antithesis, becoming more violent than violence – symbols of the hyperviolent.

The Baudrillardian principle of hyperreality is logically bifurcated. First, Baudrillard posits that a quality’s antithesis is not its opposite, but its fullest realization. Sex is opposed by pornography, rather than celibacy. Violence is opposed by absolute destruction, rather than peace. Hyperreal objects assume antithetical qualities and become oversaturated with their own characteristics: “The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal” (Baudrillard 2005, 29). Secondly, he asserts the ubiquity of hyperreality, dedicating large portions of his analysis to its identification. The hyperreal, he argues, is rendered inescapable through the proliferation of corporate advertisement, which supplants ascetic norms’ societal role through the manipulation of consumptive motive towards enjoyment rather than the subsistent fulfillment of basic needs:

The manipulating of motivation thus apparently ushers in an era in which advertising will assume moral responsibility for society as a body, replacing puritanical morality with a hedonism founded purely on satisfaction and introducing a new state of nature, so to speak, into the bosom of hypercivilization. (Baudrillard 2005, 202)

1.2. Toward a definition of fatal strategy

A definition of the principle of hyperreality is itself an excellent introduction to “fatal strategy” due to their conceptual congruence. Just as hyperreality is the saturation of an object to the degree of antithesis, fatal strategy is a system’s inevitable inclination toward the escalation and subsequent implosion of value through “the deepening of negative conditions” (Baudrillard 2005, 223). Essentially, hyperreality applies to objects, while fatal strategy is the self-destructive hyperreality of system and value. In the first paragraph of *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard describes systems engaging in fatal strategy as “proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason” (25).

According to Dominic Pettman, fatal strategies are inevitable processes of systemic entropy that “seem to be woven into the quantum fabric of the cosmos” (17). *America*, Baudrillard’s analytical critique of American society, subtly identifies numerous fatal strategies within American culture. Consider, for instance, his description of New York City:

Why do people live in New York? There is no relationship between them. Except for an inner electricity which results from the simple fact of their being crowded together. A magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for an artificial centrality. This is what makes it a self-attracting universe, which there is no reason to leave. There is no human reason to be here, except for the sheer ecstasy of being crowded together. (Baudrillard 1999, 15)

New York City is hyperreal, as it is social to the degree of isolation – much like an overcrowded party, so inundated with overlapping conversation that nothing is really communicated. New York City is a metropolis of fatal strategy; its isolating overpopulation overwhelms its infrastructure, and its intricate culture is supplanted by its behemoth, idealized cultural ascendancy. It is, in essence, perpetually collapsing beneath the weight of its own social and economic preeminence.

The concept of fatal strategy is further demonstrated by the modern capitalist system of planned obsolescence, or the stimulation of demand through the artificial sub-functionality of production quality. The concept of planned obsolescence originated in the depression era, although its mass implementation coincided with the 1950s economic prosperity, unprecedented population growth, and redirection of consumption towards the symbolic representation of social status. Manufacturers found it more profitable to produce inexpensive, perishable, and disposable products than the durable and functional wares that dominated the prewar marketplace. Objects became qualitatively differentiated by durability, supplanting the former system of functional demarcation. This fundamental economic evolution, planned obsolescence, is among the most ubiquitous fatal strategies of the capitalist mode of production, and Baudrillard addresses its societal implications in *The System of Objects*, writing,

‘Our whole economy is based on planned obsolescence and everybody who can read without moving his lips should know it’ ... As manufacturers themselves will discretely admit, the quality of most serial objects could be substantially improved with no significant increase in production costs. Deliberately debased parts are just as expensive to manufacture as normal ones ... but the object cannot be allowed to escape from ephemerality or from fashion ... In a world of (relative) affluence, the shoddiness of objects replaces the scarcity of objects as the expression of poverty. (157)

Just as New York City exemplifies fatal strategy by virtue of its hypersociality and imploding cultural primacy, planned obsolescence is a fatal strategy insofar as it perpetuates hyperconsumption and undermines the ecological system upon which it is established. Planned obsolescence is hyperreal in its reorientation of quality and consumption.

The excessive and redundant acquisition of substandard serially produced objects necessitates disproportionately higher rates of consumption paradoxically denoting poverty. Consider, for instance, a poor rural American community, its landscape dominated by inoperable, rusted automobiles and sun-bleached plastic playsets prominently displayed on front lawns, guarded by corroded chicken wire fencing. Such a community’s socioeconomic status is identifiable by its conspicuous abundance of objects. Conversely, within gated suburban communities, homeowner associations judge a property according to its tidiness, or rather the absence of unapproved objects outside of the confines of the house’s interior. Planned obsolescence has immersed consumption in the qualities of its antithesis; luxury is opposed by neglected excess and poverty is opposed by refined sparsity. Indeed, that is not to say that the poor spend more than the rich, but that they *consume more* relative to their means.¹ Whereas a petty bourgeoisie businessman may spend a thousand

¹This is, of course, not to say that the poor spend more than the wealthy. Indeed, the opposite is true. However, there is a substantial amount of research indicating that the poor are disproportionately affected by economic factors like the prevalence of

dollars on a pair of durable, handmade leather boots that will last him for a decade, a working-class consumer is more likely to purchase a cheap, serial-produced pair for a hundred dollars and replace them annually when the stitching comes apart. To quote *The System of Objects*, “the shoddiness of objects replaces the scarcity of objects as the expression of poverty” (146).

Furthermore, planned obsolescence exemplifies fatal strategy’s self-destructive hyperreality of system and value through the depletion of the natural resources utilized in the fabrication of serial ephemera. *Consumer Engineering: A New Technique for Prosperity*, the seminal work of modern industrial design that first explicitly theorized the concept of planned obsolescence, referred to the practice as “creative waste” (Gershon 2023). Its authors, Egmont Arens and Roy Sheldon noted America’s “enormous natural resources”, proclaiming that “We still have tree-covered slopes to deforest and subterranean lakes of oil to tap with our gushers”. Their once-auspicious pronouncement of the environment’s supposed indelibility now appears gravely prophetic. The system of planned obsolescence, predicated upon the erroneous presupposition that infinite profits can be derived from finite resources, epitomizes fatal strategy’s self-destruction. Fatal strategy is the self-defeating hyperreality of a system.

1.3. Toward an understanding of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

The third topic that must be clarified in the interest of further analysis is Max Weber’s 1905 magnum opus, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. As the eighth-most cited volume of social science written before the year 1950, Weber’s exploration of the relationship between ascetic Protestantism and the development of capitalist systems of exchange remains profoundly influential in the fields of economics, history, and sociology (Green 2016). Since a comprehensive summary of Weber’s analysis would be prohibitively lengthy, this section will primarily focus on the arguments most relevant to the matter at hand: namely, the theological principles of ascetic Protestantism and the secularizing influence of capital.

Weber traces the origins of the modern global network of capitalist exchange to Protestant asceticism. He begins the analysis by posing the question of why Protestants were so overwhelmingly and disproportionately represented in the upper echelons of business and society (Weber 2010, 3). The answer, he argues, can be found in the origins of capitalism, which he defines as the organized division of labor, rational investment of capital, and expectation of periodic and increased profits (xxxiv, xi, xxxiii). Furthermore, Weber defines the “spirit of capitalism”, as the “duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end to itself” (17). Within a capitalist system, an ideal worker embodies this spirit through mental fortitude, duty to his employer and his job in equal measure, the inclination toward rational calculation and self-control, and frugality.

These traits, he argues, are encouraged by the Protestant principle of “calling”, or the belief that one’s vocation is the product of divine appointment and predestination. To one who believes themselves to be “called” to their profession, the “fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs [is] the highest form which the activity of the individual could assume” (40). To a Protestant laborer, professional

planned obsolescence in inexpensive consumer goods. For example, *Consumer Legislation and the Poor* identifies factors that contribute to the poverty tax (Consumer Legislation 1967, 755–760).

1. “Neighborhood Price Levels”: According to the article, stores in low-income areas charge higher rates than stores in higher income areas, despite the comparability of the products sold. Furthermore, limited transportation options may preclude the possibility of seeking affordable alternatives. Although *Consumer Legislation and the Poor* is decades-old and its data are no longer precisely accurate, they describe a trend that has continued since the article’s publication. Contemporary research on food deserts and the relative costliness of food in poor neighborhoods, which proves the general validity of *Consumer Legislation and the Poor*’s main argument, can be found in the bibliography.
2. “Quality”: The article states that “the low value which the poor receive for their money results not only from these above average prices, but also from the below average quality of the goods which are sold in low income areas”. This aligns with the preceding assertion that “excessive and redundant acquisition of substandard serially produced objects necessitates disproportionately higher rates of consumption paradoxically denoting poverty”.

excellence assumed a uniquely spiritual significance as an exemplification of faith and a manifestation of salvation. The Protestant emphasis on calling was greatest among adherents of Calvinism – a Protestant doctrine differentiated by its principle of predestination. Many Calvinists believe that individuals are either predestined for damnation or salvation, irrespective of their involvement in the church, baptism, or personal confession of faith (Petruzzello 2023). A primary means of determining the nature of one’s predestination was through the identification of divine favor in earthly pursuits (Weber 2010, 3). For Calvinists, success in professional endeavors implied God’s favor, whereas failure had profoundly concerning eternal implications. Thus, Calvinists engaged in business with unequalled dedication and fervor, as they sought success for the determination of salvation, rather than the mere acquisition of earthly goods.

Ascetic Protestants’ dedication to worldly success was paralleled only by their disdain for the celebration of that success. Their asceticism forbade the enjoyment of sports, sexual intercourse for any reason besides procreation, and the acquisition of unnecessary commodities for personal pleasure (111–112, 105, 115). Thus, a class existed that possessed immense wealth for the sole purpose of maintaining and growing their fortunes. Rather than expending capital on hedonistic pleasures, these early Protestant businessmen developed systems of investment and saving, thus creating the basis for the contemporary global network of capital (xi). This, Weber argues, is the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Protestant anxiety regarding salvation vested material success with divine significance, and the excess capital of their ventures established the framework for modern capitalism.

Weber argues that capitalism paradoxically and inevitably undermines the Protestant ideals necessary for its conception. Ascetic Protestantism not only permitted but moralized the acquisition of wealth. Although it placed stringent restraints on that wealth’s use, the immediate material comforts of luxurious affluence proved more seductive than the fear of damnation and punishment. To quote Weber,

... the full economic effect of those great religious movements ... generally came only after the peak of the purely religious enthusiasm was past. Then the intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue; the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness. (119)

The relationship between Protestantism and capitalism is simultaneously adversarial and complementary² Protestantism, necessary for the establishment of a capitalist system, is inevitably discarded when capitalist affluence becomes commonplace. In his conclusion, Weber ponders the possibility of a capitalist society that retains its Protestant values of asceticism, labor, and rationalism, while rejecting the religious foundations of those qualities. His prognostication of “the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning” is realized in Baudrillard’s work with astonishing fidelity (124).

2. A Weberian fatal strategy

Proceeding from the definitions of relevant terms, the assertion posed in the introduction demands reconsideration: *Since ascetic Protestantism creates the moral and social conditions necessary for the establishment of a capitalist economy that ultimately negates its own religious foundations, it necessarily qualifies as a fatal strategy.* The following section will demonstrate this argument’s validity comparatively. First, it will identify Baudrillardian hyperreal continuations of ascetic Protestant

²This is, a brief synopsis of Weber’s already truncated, historical narrative. Furthermore, the aforementioned summary only addresses those aspects of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that are most conducive to comparative analysis, although it does not omit any relevant argumentation for the sake of convenience or conceptual congruency. While this summary serves to render Weber’s argumentation accessible to those readers who are unfamiliar with his greater work, it is highly recommended that readers familiarize themselves with Weber’s thought before assessing this article’s claims. Relevant critiques of Weber’s argumentation, as formulated by Jost (1971), Razzell (1977), and Sparhawk (1976), can be found in this article’s bibliography.

ethics in order to contextualize the process of secularization. Then, it will relate those secularized, hyperreal vestiges of Protestantism to Baudrillard's description of fatal strategy and consider the relationship's implications. Collectively, these analyses will demonstrate Protestant asceticism's qualification as a fatal strategy.

2.1. Hyperconsumption and protestant asceticism

The final pages of Weber's conclusion are concerned with the topic of the "secularizing influence of wealth". To summarize his arguments, he cites a quote from John Wesley on the relationship between affluence and spirituality:

I fear, whenever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches ... although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. (118–119)

Wesley argues that religion demands asceticism, asceticism creates affluence, and affluence causes a secularization that negates religion but retains its qualities. Protestants did not accumulate capital as a means of satisfying their needs, but as an attempt to discern divine approval within the material world – a designation of one's bank account balance as a barometer for God's favor. Wealth's secularizing influence is accompanied by a decline in spiritual anxiety regarding salvation, but the inclination towards superfluous acquisition remains, and is prominently reflected in Baudrillard's work.

Consumption, it can be argued, is the fundamental focus of Baudrillard's entire philosophy. *The System of Objects*, his first book, illustrates the contemporary proliferation of mass consumption,

Littre's dictionary defines 'object' in one of its meanings as 'anything which is the cause or subject of a passion; figuratively – and *par excellence* – the loved object'.

Let us grant that our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion – the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in the 'human' passions. Indeed, the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others, and sometimes even reign supreme, all other passions being absent. (91)

However, within this system of consumption, a degree of rationalistic asceticism remains, and is in some senses exacerbated. Consider, for instance, the traditional bourgeoisie bedroom: a large bed, framed by a headboard, situated in the middle of the room or flush against the wall that faces the door; a series of wooden dressers and drawers adjacent to the bed; a large mirror centered above a vanity and a large chair on the opposing wall; family photos and portraits framed on the walls. Every object exists relationally and cohesively, complimenting the other, explicit in its function and resolute in its orientation. Such an interior design is hierarchal in its deference to the bed, patriarchal in its familial orientation, narcissistic in its mirrors' inward reflection, and indulgent in its ornamentation (13–29).

Conversely, consider the modern bedroom, which is dominated by "corner divans and beds, coffee tables, shelving – a plethora of new elements [which] are now supplanting the traditional range of furniture" (15). According to Baudrillard, the modern object is "liberated in its function", divested of symbolic significance and oriented towards functionality (15–17). Objects have become more compact, complex, and manipulable. Beds can convert into sofas or fold backwards into the wall; wardrobes and dressers are largely substituted for built-in closets; vanities and mirrors are succeeded by larger bathroom counters with wall-length mirrors and retractable drawers for cosmetics. This new model for contemporary domesticity is spiritually and symbolically impoverished, and it constitutes a reorientation of cultural priority and value from the traditional and immovable towards innovation, convenience, complexity, and mobility. In modern design, the bed, and therefore the individual, is no longer the focal point of the bedroom. Rather, numerous objects exist in an

egalitarian stasis, liberated from their symbolic relationality and subject to stylistic manipulation. They are, in effect, secularized and rationalized – representative of a consumerist asceticism that retains the exaggerated qualities of its inverse by virtue of its rationality (16).

It must be considered that while Weber analyzes the inclination toward the accumulation of capital, Baudrillard addresses the acquisition of material goods. Within the context of the greater analysis, this difference is easily reconcilable, as secularization abolishes the religious prohibition of material acquisition while retaining crucial elements of the previous system of monetary accumulation. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard describes the moralization of success and its manifestation in consumption, writing, “Personal achievement is indeed an *obligation* haunting the modern consumer ...” (164). Baudrillard syntactically and conceptually parallels Weber’s description of calling: “The only way of living acceptably to God was ... solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world” (40). Although divine obligation has been supplanted by the system of consumption, the prioritization and moralization of success remains unchanged.

Within this fatal system, one’s societally mandated success is relative to the degree of one’s consumption, which retains a quasi-spiritual significance. Religious qualities are readily apparent in the act of curating and expanding a collection of serial objects. In his analysis of serial collection, Baudrillard quotes Maurice Rheims, writing,

Passion for the object leads to its being looked upon as a thing made by God. A collector of porcelain eggs is liable to believe that God never created a form more beautiful or more singular, and indeed that He devised this form solely for the greater delight of collectors. (93)

Fundamentally, the early Protestant emphasis on the accumulation of capital and contemporary consumerism are contextually interchangeable, as they share the quality of acquisition and the value of spirituality. The difference between monetary accumulation and commodity acquisition is the former’s legitimately religious context and the latter’s secular appropriation of that religious context’s remnants. Baudrillard’s work on consumption, collection, and acquisition serves as a secularized continuation and adaptation of Weber’s principle of Protestant asceticism.

2.2. The principle of calling and ubiquitous labor

The second topic of this analysis is the Protestant principle of “calling” – divine vocational assignment – which Weber describes thus:

But at least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This it was which inevitably gave everyday worldly activity a religious significance and which first created the conception of a calling in this sense. The conception of the calling thus brings out that central dogma of all Protestant denominations which the Catholic division of ethical precepts into *praecepta* and *consilia* discards. The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling. (Weber 2010, 40)

The principle of calling demanded “acceptance of his life in the world as [the] task” of the believer (47). Just as the surplus capital of wealthy Protestant businessmen served as the foundation for the modern system of capitalist exchange, the tireless labor of Protestant workers and entrepreneurs formed the infrastructure of the modern economy. In the book’s first chapter, Weber illustrates the extent of early Protestant workers’ industriousness anecdotally, writing that “... in East Prussia Frederick William I tolerated the Mennonites as indispensable to industry, in spite of their absolute refusal to perform military service ...” (10–11). Given Frederick William I’s role in nearly tripling the size of the Prussian military through conscription, his tolerance of the Mennonite aversion to military service is a resounding endorsement of their economic essentiality (Cunningham 2023).

The Protestant conception of work as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s will, as opposed to Catholicism’s monasticism, was a seismic departure from previous theologies. Although wealth’s

secularizing influence unmoored the principle of calling from its religious foundations, many of its original qualities remain evident in the present – primarily in the ubiquity of labor. As stated in the previous summary, labor, nature, culture, and leisure were once distinct from each other. Protestants toiled tirelessly in their vocations, but enjoyed leisurely domesticity, concerning themselves with scripture, meditation, and familial matters. The ideal Protestant household was envisioned as a spiritual sanctuary in which believers recuperated from their work and raised their children to uphold the faith.

Despite the erosion of capitalism's religious foundation, Baudrillard demonstrates that the moralization of labor remains intact, while the household's sanctimonious status is critically undermined. The home has become labor's final frontier. Baudrillard depicts the current epoch as one where labor and leisure have been integrated and redefined to the point of indistinguishability. He elucidates the compulsory and individuating nature of this integration, writing,

What matters to him is neither possession nor enjoyment but responsibility ... His praxis is exclusively external. This modern home-dweller ... dominates, controls and orders [objects]. He discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system. (Baudrillard 2005, 25)

The excessive accumulation of capital, when secularized, transitions towards mass consumption. Similarly, the secularization of calling has seen the proliferation of work into all facets of the human experience, culminating in a voluntary but inescapable ubiquity of labor. Rather than a mere proprietor, the modern homeowner is an environmental and stylistic engineer commanding the modification, enhancement, and symbolic reorientation of the furnishings acquired through the profits of labor. Within this Weberian context, Baudrillard reveals that homeownership is itself a secularized calling that perpetuates the deification of labor while dismantling the final vestiges of a now-antiquated tranquil domesticity.

3. Conclusion

Baudrillard's principle of hyperreality posits that a quality's antithesis is not its opposite, but its fullest realization. Applied to larger societal trends, hyperreality becomes fatal strategy – the self-defeating hyperreality of system and value. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber argues that ascetic Protestantism moralized the qualities of mental fortitude, duty to employer and vocation, frugality, and the inclination toward rational calculation and self-control. These traits, combined with the attribution of spiritual significance to mundane activity, create the ideal conditions for a capitalist economy. Then, the religious framework essential to the establishment of a capitalist system is inevitably discarded when affluence becomes commonplace, due to the secularizing influence of wealth. *Proceeding from the consideration of these concepts and their subsequent analysis, it is clear that ascetic Protestantism qualifies as a Baudrillardian fatal strategy, as it creates the moral and social conditions necessary for the establishment of a capitalist economy that propagates hyperreality and ultimately negates its own religious foundations.*

This deduction is reinforced by the identification of the contemporary, hyperreal vestiges of Protestant asceticism. For instance, hyperreal frugality becomes mass-consumption – an exacerbation of Protestant rationalism, a depletion of symbolic significance, and a reorientation towards functionality. Both the Protestant accumulation of capital and mass-consumption share the quality of acquisition and the value of spirituality. Mass-consumption is but the hyperreal, secularized appropriation of ascetic Protestant frugality. The opposite of the accumulation of capital is not poverty, but the endless accumulation of goods. Similarly, hyperreal “calling” becomes ubiquitous labor. The moralization of labor remains intact, while labor and leisure are integrated and redefined to the point of indistinguishability. The opposite of Protestantism's moralization of labor is not inactivity, but the proliferation of labor into every facet of life. Furthermore, since mass-consumption and ubiquitous labor inevitably strain the economic, ecological, and social systems upon which they are established, they qualify as fatal strategies.

This conclusion's implications are manifold. Within the context of Baudrillard's greater philosophy, it demonstrates the ubiquity of fatal strategies. While fatal strategies are clearly demonstrated on a smaller scale, as in the case of urban overpopulation, the identification of fatal strategy within the genesis of global network of capital broadens the principle's scope immeasurably. Within the context of Weber's work, this conclusion identifies the modern remnants of Protestantism and applies them to the present. In the final chapter of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he writes, "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future ... For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved'". This reimagination of fatal strategies' scope all but confirms his pessimistic prognostication. We are the constituents and proponents of the society that Max Weber feared, and Jean Baudrillard lamented – before that unfortunate fact can be changed, it must first be recognized.

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