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ROBERI (Damiano), « Capitalism as collapsing religion. Milan, Capital of the XXI Century », *Revue d'histoire de la pensée économique*, n° 4, 2017 – 2, p. 151-177

DOI : [10.15122/isbn.978-2-406-07355-0.p.0151](https://doi.org/10.15122/isbn.978-2-406-07355-0.p.0151)

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RÉSUMÉ – Cet article explore le rapport entre capitalisme et nature. La tendance à l'abus naturel de ce système économique, qui n'a pas d'essence en soi, est soulignée dans le fragment de Benjamin intitulé *Capitalisme comme religion*. Ensuite, les implications de ce résultat sont développées en liens avec *Passagenwerk* et l'*Expo2015* de Milan. La phrase "le capitalisme ne mourra pas de mort naturelle" constitue le fondement d'une saisie des mutations d'une religion toujours en train de s'effondrer.

MOTS-CLÉS – Benjamin, capitalisme, nature, religion, *Expo2015*.

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ABSTRACT – This paper analyzes the relationship between capitalism and Nature. The typical tendency to natural misuse of this economic system, which has no essence per se, is highlighted through Benjamin's fragment *Capitalism as religion*. The implications of said result are then developed by referring to the *Arcades Project* and to *Expo2015*. The sentence "capitalism will not die a natural death" represents the basis for an inquiry which investigates the mutations of a religion in constant collapse.

KEYWORDS – Benjamin, Capitalism, Nature, Religion, *Expo2015*.

# CAPITALISM AS COLLAPSING RELIGION

Milan, Capital of the XXI Century

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## INTRODUCTION

“The experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 667). The following paper, in short, will consist of nothing but an attempt to interpret this sentence from Benjamin’s<sup>1</sup> *Arcades Project*—and, at the same time, offer an explanation

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1 “The German Jewish critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is now generally regarded as one of the most important witnesses to European modernity. Despite the relative brevity of his writing career—his life was cut short on the Spanish border in flight before the Nazis—he left behind a body of work astonishing in its depth and diversity” (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 1). Within the various phases of his non-systematic thinking, one can indeed find studies which range (to mention just a few scopes), from philosophy of language to literary criticism, from sociology of art to a critique of the philosophy of history. His intellectual relationships were equally rich: among the most meaningful were those with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Gershom Scholem (who introduced Benjamin to Jewish mysticism), Ernst Bloch, Sigfried Kracauer, and Th.W. Adorno. Despite this wealth of influences and exchanges, however, Benjamin always remained “à l’écart de tous les courants”, to quote Adorno. Both of the principle texts examined within the paper—*Capitalism as Religion* and the *Arcades project*—bear witness to this autonomy. The latter work in particular—a “cultural history of the emergence of urban commodity capitalism in mid-nineteenth-century France” (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 1)—represents a sort of *summa* of the reflections developed by Benjamin after his approach to Marxism. It is, however, necessary to underline the peculiarity of said approach: “early and late, he [Benjamin] was more a visionary

of the choice to do so, with the above phrase as the keystone of my reasoning. The core of the exposition will be the relationship between capitalism and nature, firstly starting from the Benjaminian analysis and then trying to develop a reflection on our present, inspired by said discussion. The first step, after some introductory and methodological considerations, will consist in an analysis of Benjamin's fragment *Capitalism as Religion*. I will try to highlight its structurally open character, which is precisely what makes it suitable in order to tackle the problem (which has to be discussed *mit jeder Wendung*) summarized by this paper's opening sentence. I will show how the essence of capitalism is precisely to have none, and how its parasitic behavior necessarily produces a misuse, an abuse (which affects also the critiques against this economical system). I will then make reference to the *Arcades Project* to confirm the points already highlighted, concentrating particularly on some images—the greenhouse, the role played by *Art Nouveau* and the prostitute—which will allow us to understand better the ties that bind capitalism and nature. These points will be finally recalled in the last paragraph, where the reasoning behind the second part of the title will become clear. Milan, host city of *Expo 2015*, will appear as capital of the 21st century, as embodiment of a new phase of the relationship between capitalism and nature, and at the same time the perfect scenario to investigate our very present.

#### I. METHODOLOGICAL AND INTRODUCTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

The first, and obvious, objection, which could be posed to this introduction, could regard the decision to consider the opening sentence as a “tremendous abbreviation” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 396) of Benjamin's thinking on capitalism. A closer look, however, shows how this doubt

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insurrectionist than a hard-line ideologue [...] a nonconforming ‘left-wing outsider’” (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 9). For an introduction which continues to be of interest (although not recent and sometimes questionable) to Benjamin's intellectual path, see also Scholem (Scholem, 1981).

can be easily cleared, regarding the method as well as the content of this sentence.

Regarding the first issue, in short, I try in general to read Benjamin “against the grain”, to show how he was not only a great thinker of History, but also and at the same time—and this can be even more interesting for us, today—an author able to develop deep reflections on Nature. Even though this topic rarely appears in the forefront of his analysis, it is always present within his inquiry into the *Naturgeschichte*: this concept must be read—in an approach contrary to most secondary literature<sup>2</sup>—in both of its elements. Equally important is the will not to relegate Benjamin as a piece of the cultural heritage of the last century, something he himself would have been the first to reject. Without forcing the Benjaminian thinking, it is however not possible to avoid reading it in the light of its own *jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*. Here we find two issues, on one hand cognizability/readability, on the other hand usability<sup>3</sup>; the theoretical and the practical-political sides merge in the quotation, in the “tiger’s leap” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 395)<sup>4</sup>. This approach can prove useful to add new stimuli to the most renowned interpretations. We are surely not allowed to impose on Benjamin categories he could not have had in mind, but at the same time we cannot embrace a sort of Benjaminian double truth, separating the exegetic and the interpretative moment: “*Philologie ohne Aktualität ist blind, Aktualität ohne Philologie ist leer*” (Wohlfarth, 2011, p. 269). We must then look for and build the similarities between our present and his reflections<sup>5</sup>.

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2 The absence of analysis specifically dedicated to the topic of Nature emerges from some of the most recent and/or best works of secondary literature, such as *Benjamin-Handbuch* (Lindner, 2011), *Benjamins Begriffe* (Opitz & Wizisla, 2011) and *Benjamin* (Lavelle, 2013). An exception in this sense is represented by B. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History. Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Hanssen, 2000).

3 Salzani (2013, p. 35) underlines the risk of confusing readability and usability of Benjamin’s thinking. In my opinion, however, the best approach to the works of this author can be found within the *Konvolut N* of the *Arcades Project*: “the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 460).

4 See Voigts, 2011, p. 826–850. See particularly p. 843: “*der Begriff des Zitates bezieht sich bei Benjamin nicht nur auf die Sprache, sondern auch auf Realien, auf die Reale Geschichte*”.

5 “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time”. “The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 395). We could controversially say that we

Regarding the content, even a concise interpretation of the terms of the opening sentence of this paper opens up a large part of Benjamin's thinking. Let us begin with "experience": the original German word is *Erfahrung*, which has a specific meaning within his reflections<sup>6</sup>. Benjamin could have used the term *Erlebnis* here: it seems, though, that the *Erlebnis* of his generation would have been that of a natural death of capitalism. Most importantly, *Erfahrung* recalls a constructive moment<sup>7</sup>, thus a reflective-critical as well as political attitude, which is in no way limited to a naive mirroring of the immediate reality. It should be noticed, in fact, that experience is something fleeting, which we lack more and more, and thus something we have to fight for. Benjamin, then, writes: "of our generation". Keeping in mind another fragment of the *Arcades Project*, which states "every epoch appears to itself inescapably modern—but each one also has a right to be taken thus" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 546), it is possible to observe that we are not facing here a mere observation, but rather a question which has to be posed *mit jeder Wendung*. Benjamin obviously means here *his* generation, but he does not explicitly specify this; thus he leaves us room for further considerations. Let us leave capitalism aside for a moment and look at the last section of the sentence, "will not die a natural death". We can separate this into two parts, "will not die" and "a natural death": the first part, considered alone, seems to go against Benjamin's own—helpless but winged, as we will repeat at the end of this paper—revolutionary and utopic hopes. These words also have a kind of Benjaminian truth, though, as they hint at the *phantasmagoric*, ghostly<sup>8</sup> existence of high capitalism,

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must create a *fashionable* Benjamin. In this sense a potential critique to my perspective—*i.e.* the attempt to add this author to the cultural industry on the ecological crisis—lets one further argument in its favor emerge.

6 An overview on Benjamin's reflection on this topic within his whole *œuvre* can be found in Th. Weber (2011, p. 230–259).

7 "Erfahrung ist ein Artikulationsbegriff, wobei Artikulation im doppelten Sinne als Verknüpfung und als Ausdruck zu verstehen ist. Erfahrung ist eine Dimension menschlicher Praxis [...] Den Gegenbegriff zur Erfahrung bildet das Erlebnis [...] als sozial-psychologische Form der 'Selbstentfremdung des Menschen'" (Th. Weber, 2011, p. 236–237).

8 In this sense we can recall Derrida's statement: "*la hantise appartient à la structure de toute hégémonie*" (Derrida, 1993, p. 69). Even if this sentence has there a different meaning (concerning the impossibility of ever getting rid of Marx), it is true also from my point of view that capitalism "*c'est quelque chose qu'on ne sait pas, justement, et on ne sait pas si précisément cela est, si ça existe, si ça répond à un nom et correspond à une essence*" (p. 25–26). I will come back to this point in the following paragraph.

as a full realization of modernity. Let us now consider the second part: the concept of “natural death” seems to recall the *Theological-political Fragment* and the idea of Nature’s messianic transience<sup>9</sup>. Capitalism *could* die this death—but this is *not* the death that *will not cause* its disappearance. What does it all mean? We are facing here the polysemous character of the term “nature”<sup>10</sup>: it is neither possible to avoid it, nor do we have to; instead, we have to recognize and to discuss it. Regarding the first part of this task, I believe that Benjamin does not mean here simply “natural”, but rather *naturgeschichtlich*. This appears evident, if we think of his critique, in the 11<sup>th</sup> *Thesis*, of the ideas, typical of the Social Democracy, of a Nature, which “exists gratis”, and of the “moving with the current” (Benjamin, 2006b, p. 393–394). Both of these aspects are indeed nothing but different formulations of the capitalist ideology of progress.

There remains, of course, the possibility of reading—between necessity and interpretative temptation—this Benjaminian sentence from *our* point of view, from that of *our* generation. For the moment I would like just to address two possible meanings of the expression “will not die a natural death”, both tied to a disappearance of capitalism due to natural (*i.e.* linked to actual ecological crisis) causes. These two options are equally wrong. On the one hand we can imagine a violent death, but in this case it would not be possible to overtake the critique addressed by Benjamin to Karl Kraus, who—denouncing the damages inflicted on Nature by Man—cannot reach a truly political stance, as he leaves the solution of this situation to the revenge of Nature on Man<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, a non-violent end would represent something really improbable, looking both at the enormous amount of scientific inquiries available<sup>12</sup>

9 It is not possible to analyze here the *Theological-political Fragment*: among the many interpretations of this complex text, a particularly interesting one (for the attention dedicated to the role played by Nature in those lines) can be found in A. Benjamin, 2013, p. 144–161.

10 “To write the history of thought is sometimes to write the history of a series of misinterpretations” (Hadot, 2006, p. 14).

11 An in-depth reading of Benjamin’s essay on Karl Kraus can be found in Weigel, 2008. I found really interesting to notice that Benjamin finds the counterpart of this revenge of Nature on Man in the idea of a creation that has become a place of an institutionalized cult: the same situation described in *Capitalism as Religion*.

12 This very alternative has been outlined by Randers: “once in overshoot there are only two paths back into sustainable territory: either *managed decline*, through the orderly introduction of a new solution [...] or *collapse*” (Randers, 2012, p. xiv).

and at the inertia of politicians in tackling these problems. In order to further develop my reflections in this sense—*i.e.* not only to justify my attempt at interpretation, but also to show why the topic of Nature is fundamental within an analysis of this economic system—it is now necessary to try and understand better *what* capitalism is, according to Benjamin. Thus, in the following paragraph I will discuss the fragment *Capitalism as Religion*.

## II. CAPITALISM: INSTRUCTIONS FOR (NATURAL) MISUSE

Within the fragment *Capitalism as Religion*<sup>13</sup> Benjamin develops an analysis of the structure, of the tendencies—*not* of the essence—of capitalism. The main acquisition of my reading of this text will be the individuation of what could be called *instructions for (natural) misuse*, from a dual point of view: on the one hand, as I will show, because capitalism consists in an intrinsic inclination to misuse-abuse—and Nature plays a central role in this sense. On the other hand, the same result can be also found, this time not intentionally, within the most important authors recalled here (*i.e.* Freud, Marx, Nietzsche). Benjamin is, on the other hand, able to avoid these difficulties, precisely in the light of the characteristics of his critique. After outlining these pivotal issues, I will pass on to the *Arcades Project*.

I believe that a good starting point can be the last of the problems just sketched, *i.e.* the position of the critique towards capitalism. It could easily be said that, just as Benjamin brings to the forefront the weaknesses of the authors he examines, the same could be done to him. For example, one could link his interpretation to a particular phase of the capitalist *Schuldgeschichte* (Hamacher, 2009), thus limiting, at least partially, its efficacy. This hypothesis, although incorrect in my opinion, allows us to hint at a confrontation with an œuvre like *Le*

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13 I do not pretend, within this paragraph, to develop a throughout analysis either of this fragment or of the sources by which it is influenced. In this sense, see the works quoted in the following notes.

*nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, where we find not only a discussion of the adaptability of capitalism, but also of the relationship of the critique with it. Boltanski and Chiappello's inquiry is particularly interesting because it links, through the notion of *esprit*, the economic and critical dimension. This tie develops itself on the basis of a quite stable capitalistic "nature"<sup>14</sup>. A minimal definition of this economical system, which is "*à bien des égards [...] absurde*" (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 40), valid for all its phases, is the limitless accumulation of capital<sup>15</sup>. The reaction of the anti-capitalistic critique, its relationship with this object of reflection, shows the constant necessity, for capitalism, to make reference to its enemies. Before being swallowed up by this economic system—or, rather, at the same time—they, in fact, provide it with a further push to survive the crisis it undergoes<sup>16</sup>. I cannot fully examine here the analysis of Boltanski and Chiappello, but I would like to underline briefly some points, in order to be able to appreciate better some peculiarities of Benjamin's *Capitalism as Religion*. The first is the necessity of an interaction between the idea of the self-restructuration of capitalism and its same minimal definition of accumulation: in other words, how can this system undergo a substantial transformation, if it represents nothing but the very transformation set as principle<sup>17</sup>? It makes thus not so much sense to talk about the spirit of capitalism: it is rather better to identify the *nouveauté* as the main characteristic of this phenomenon (as evident from Benjamin's *Arcades Project*). So, one must talk not of the spirit of capitalism, but instead of capitalism *as* spirit, ethereal and impossible to grasp. Secondly, the mobilizing capacity of capitalism is, according to Boltanski and Chiappello, so high that this system is able to include in itself also the critiques, thus appearing strongly adaptive-reactive. This implies the consideration of

14 See Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 86.

15 See Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 35. I would like to underline that we find, already here, a self-reference and a sort of tautology: capitalism is "*une exigence d'accumulation illimitée du capital*". But what is capital? What is accumulated (we are only talking about a minimal definition). Who accumulates it? Capitalism... and so on. Another element to be noticed is the *dynamic* character of this system.

16 See Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 71–72.

17 Boltanski and Chiappello too recognize this point: "*le capitalisme a une tendance perpétuelle à se transformer*" (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 649–650); the Benjaminian analyses, however, do not simply underline a tendency of this economical system, but describe the latter *as (als)* a tendency, and are thus situated on a qualitatively different level.

three relevant turning points: the “*potentiellement mortelles*” (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 27) crisis periodically experienced by capitalism, the possibility of easily adapting the analysis of this work to our present<sup>18</sup>, and the structural lateness of critique. Regarding the first point I would like to observe, before coming back to this in looking at *Capitalism as Religion*, that the true crises, although doubtlessly real, do not represent a real danger for capitalism, but are instead a part of it<sup>19</sup>. In this sense, passing on to the second issue, I would speak, more than of an easy adaptability of the analysis of Boltanski and Chiappello to our present, or of the necessity of a new formulation of the critique (able “*de [...] prendre en compte la thématique écologique*”) (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011,

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18 The work of Boltanski and Chiappello, in fact “*porte sur la période 1965-1995*” (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 927). The reader could raise two objections to the article: firstly regarding the differences between the neoliberal capitalism analyzed by Boltanski and Chiappello and the capitalism of the Thirties which was contemporary to Benjamin, and secondly about the lack of precise chronological references. Concerning the first issue, I would answer by stressing how the quotes from Boltanski and Chiappello are drawn, not by chance, from those parts of their work (introduction and conclusion) which are less directly linked to the specific economical setting they tackle in the central sections of the book. Moving on to the second hypothetical objection, the absence of concrete references is due to my attempt to recall Benjamin’s own theoretical gesture. This is true for what concerns both chronology and the definitions of capitalism here encountered/proposed. I have no difficulty in admitting that said definitions are very general, but—firstly—they are only working hypotheses, and not conclusive statements. Furthermore, had this been the case, the very structure of the paper would have been denied. The critique of capitalism developed here tries in fact not to give this economic system a foothold, leaning on which it could renew and improve itself. The definition of capitalism, on the contrary, must recall mimetically the absence of a structure typical of its object of inquiry: generality is (particularly in this case) different from vagueness. Finally, I do not mean that temporality is irrelevant for Benjamin. The context of his reflections is however not the linear, “homogeneous and empty” time. This is evident, by the way, within the very *Arcades project*, where Benjamin talks about the capitalistic world contemporary to him in 19th century Paris. The Benjaminian thinking is not based on periodizations, but first and foremost on the *encounter* between historical *moments*, chronologically distant, in a new and decisive—from both a cognitive and salvific point of view—constellation. On this topic see also n. 50.

19 It would be also possible to provokingly recall Baudrillard’s sentences: “*pour redresser les finalités, pour réactiver le principe de l’économique, il faut régénérer la pénurie. D’où l’écologie, où la menace de la rareté absolue [...] La crise va permettre de rendre au code de l’économie son référentiel perdu, au principe de production une gravité qui lui échappait. On va retrouver le goût de l’ascèse, l’investissement pathétique qui naît du manque et de la privation*” (Baudrillard, 1976, p. 56). Even if the idea of the *creation* of the ecological crisis is doubtlessly excessive, these words, purified from their postmodern character, hint at the fundamental problem I am trying to examine here.

p. 943), of the exigence of finding a critique intrinsically adaptable, so to speak. This implies, looking finally at the problem of the structural lateness of the antagonistic stances, the necessity of finding a point of view able to follow the *déplacements* of capitalism, without too much (or too little) *catégorisation*. While the first of these two options represents the congenial weakness of the stances antithetic to capitalism, with the second one the very essence of the critique would disappear<sup>20</sup>.

Now, what can *Capitalism as Religion* tell us about the aforementioned problems? The first step we must take to answer this question is to notice how Benjamin insists on the *essential* character of the relationship between capitalism and religion<sup>21</sup>. This economic system is seen as *essentially* religious and *essentially* parasitic<sup>22</sup>. Both points are worthy of our attention: with the first, *i.e.* the religiosity of capitalism, we are facing a system which “serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 288). It must be underlined how Benjamin emphasizes this characteristic both in the first lines and towards the end of the text, but with different nuances: in the latter case the origin of the worries is found in a “*geistige* [...] *Ausweglosigkeit*” (Benjamin, 1991, p. 102)<sup>23</sup>. Capitalism thus relates itself to what could be called

20 “*La catégorisation consiste à rapprocher sous un certain rapport des événements singuliers pour les mettre en série. C’est l’une des opérations de base qu’utilisent les personnes quand elles cherchent à donner sens au monde dans lequel elles vivent, en en tirant de grands invariants et une certaine image simplifiée de la façon dont il fonctionne*”. “*Les déplacements désignent en revanche les actions des personnes en tant qu’elles tendent à échapper à la catégorisation*”. From this follows the most interesting point, in my opinion: “*dans l’histoire que nous racontons, c’est plutôt le capitalisme qui déplace et la critique qui catégorise. Dès lors, la critique est fatalement toujours en retard, car elle doit pour être efficace analyser et mettre en série les déplacements effectués par le capitalisme, les catégoriser pour les dévoiler et les dénoncer comme injustes*” (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 939). It must be noticed, though, that according to Boltanski and Chiappello these two categories are not completely counterposed to each other.

21 About Benjamin’s debts to and differences from Max Weber, see for example M. Löwy: “Benjamin’s fragment is clearly inspired by Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [...] his presentation is nourished by the ideas and arguments of the German sociologist, giving them, however, a new meaning” (Löwy, 2009, p. 61–62).

22 “A religion may be discerned in capitalism [...] an essentially religious phenomenon”; “Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West [...] until it reached the point where Christianity’s history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 288–289).

23 The English translation is “spiritual [...] hopelessness” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 290): it is surely not completely wrong, but in this way the idea of the impossible search of an exit from/in capitalism is lost.

its spiritual fount—the *Ausweglosigkeit*, the lack of escape routes—in a paradoxical way, given that it seems to foster the growth of these phenomena which it should fight, but appears instead to have generated. To borrow a quotation from the *Arcades Project*: “the first tremors of awakening serve to deepen sleep” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 391); that is, the preoccupation for the lack of an exit strategy from capitalism pushes us even more unconditionally into its arms. This first point, which is fundamental both for capitalism and for the critiques against it, can be summarized with the words “we cannot draw closed the net in which we are caught” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 288)<sup>24</sup>.

This principal characteristic develops itself in the other main traits which are typical of capitalism, according to Benjamin. These are, synthetically: the absence of a proper theology, its reduction to a pure cultic exercise, the pervasiveness (both quantitative and qualitative) of capitalism, the fact that it creates *Schuld* and not atonement, aiming at the destruction of existence through the involvement of God (who must however reveal Himself only in the very last moment, when hope and desperation are intertwined)<sup>25</sup>. It appears thus evident that the normal functioning of this system produces a misuse, an abuse<sup>26</sup>, which appears the result of an aggressive, amorphous and unlimited attitude towards reality, independently of this latter’s way of presenting itself<sup>27</sup>. The following part of the fragment deals briefly and enigmatically with the figures of Freud, Nietzsche<sup>28</sup>, and Marx. The other most important source, Weber, appears to be surpassed already in the very beginning of the text, as we have already seen: Benjamin underlines the *absence* of a distance—he uses indeed *als*, not *und*—between capitalism and religion.

24 About this peculiar sentence see S. Weber (2010, p. 250–280) and Hamacher (2009, p. 88–89). Both interpreters discuss the problematic Benjaminian expression “later on” (“later on, however, we shall be able to gain an overview”: Benjamin, 2004, p. 288). In my opinion, it is of great interest to notice that this is the only *indeterminate* reference to the dimension of the future made by Benjamin: I will show how this differentiates him from the other authors he quotes.

25 See Benjamin, 2004, p. 289: “to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is actually its secret *hope*”.

26 This important aspect has been underlined also by Agamben, 2007, p. 73–92.

27 It should rather be said: independently of how capitalism imagines reality as its counterpart—the latter is always nature, as I will further argue.

28 S. Weber (2010, p. 265) has noticed that *Capitalism as Religion* “depends entirely on this ambiguity”, that is that of Benjamin towards Nietzsche. For a global overview on the relationship between these two authors see McFarland (2013).

So he expresses an identification, not a mere juxtaposition<sup>29</sup>. I cannot here examine accurately the objections raised by Benjamin to each of these thinkers: I just want to highlight how the three “masters of suspicion” *become*<sup>30</sup> priests of capitalism. The merit they share is their ability to expound the capitalist tendencies right up to their extreme consequences<sup>31</sup>; however, they represent only a further *Steigerung* of this system, and not an *Umkehr*<sup>32</sup>. I believe that this is indeed true, but also I hold that this evaluation represents only a part of the whole problem: it focuses too much on the conclusion, and so neglects a previous step. These authors are able to grasp important aspects of capitalism, which I would summarize as the unclear non-recent and non-necessary character of its origin<sup>33</sup>: this is the ultimate meaning of the genealogy of the moral, of the primitive accumulation, of the primitive hord and *Urmord*. Insofar as they do this, they are entirely right. However, the endogenizing tendency<sup>34</sup> of capitalism swallows up the critique, at the very same moment in which it—passing to its negative side—tries to develop definite, more than definitive, perspectives on the future. These authors, to recall once again Boltanski and Chiappello’s analysis, categorize too

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- 29 I will show in the next paragraph how the idea of a safe distance, particularly from nature, is an illusion proper to capitalism. Agamben shows this clearly, in my opinion, when he states that capitalism is “a single, multiform, ceaseless process of separation that assails every thing, every place, every human activity in order to divide it from itself [...] In its extreme form, the capitalist religion realizes the pure form of separation, to the point that there is nothing left to separate” (Agamben, 2007, p. 81).
- 30 C. Salzani (even though he recalls Ricœur’s analysis) misses this nuance (Salzani, 2013, p. 23). Certainly, Benjamin writes “Freud’s theory, too, belongs to the hegemony of the priests of this cult”, but also (on Marx) “the capitalism that refuses to change course *becomes* socialism” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 289, italics mine). One must not underestimate the dynamism of these authors’ reflections (is not Freud’s a psychodynamic approach?).
- 31 See Steiner (2009, p. 43): “*Darin, daß sie [scil. Freud, Nietzsche, Marx] in die immanente Logik ihres Gegenstandes eindringen und diese mit äußerster Konsequenz zu Ende denken, liegt zugleich auch ihr diagnostischer Wert [...] sie die religiöse Struktur des Kapitalismus mimetisch abbilden*”. See also Hamacher (2009, p. 107).
- 32 This is, at least, C. Salzani’s opinion (Salzani, 2013, p. 23–24, where he lists all the different translations of the word *Umkehr* by scholars).
- 33 W. Hamacher has highlighted this point well: “*Schuld ist eine Herkunfts-kategorie*” (Hamacher, 2009, p. 79).
- 34 Endogenization, as a typical characteristic both of capitalism and of the Will to Power, recalls the presence, within *Capitalism as Religion*, of E. Unger and of the hypothesis of “the overcoming of capitalism by migration” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 290). This is linked here probably to Zionism, but can also be read from the perspective of the social exclusion: see Gentili, 2014, p. 57–70.

much, surrendering to the illusion of continuity<sup>35</sup>. They *transform*, from masters of the *past* suspicion, into *priests of the future*, because of the *misuse/abuse of their critique*, whose fundamental intuition—the dynamic character of capitalism—is applied only to a part of the temporal spectrum. The lateness of all these authors, whose reflections represent an *only potentially deadly* crisis which capitalism must periodically confront, appears thus evident: the crisis is only *potentially* deadly, because this economic system is able to assimilate their findings/demystifications and to use them for its own advantage. Each of these authors offers, so to speak, a point of resistance (Marx) or an instrument (the idea of Sin, the intertwining of hope and despair) which capitalism uses in order to strengthen itself. Benjamin, quite on the contrary, does not lend support to capitalism, as he limits his analysis to a reproduction (with a mimetic but first and foremost critical approach) of its tendency. He remains faithful to the *Bilderverbot*, and thus proves himself able to avoid falling into “an endless universal polemic” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 288). He does not attempt to close the net in which we stand, trying to catch capitalism from an external point of view, but instead anticipates here the methodological idea of the Trojan horse, *i.e.* of an action from the inside. As he will write in the *Arcades Project*: “the imminent awakening is poised, like the wooden horse of the Greeks, in the Troy of dreams” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 392).

From this brief review both of the characteristics of capitalism and of the weaknesses of the critique against it, it appears evident that this economic system, according to Benjamin, has the particular charter of an entity devoid of a stable essence<sup>36</sup>, which would be possibly used

35 The *Steigerung* is in fact “*apparently steady*” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 289, italics mine). The relationship with Nature plays a significant role, not by chance, in these authors’ reflections about the future. It would be interesting to further investigate whether in this sense we find once more a natural misuse, an abuse towards it, or at least a very problematic presence. It is sufficient to recall in this sense the image of “the last ton of fossilized coal” which closes M. Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* (M. Weber, 2001, p. 123), the Marxian naturalization of man and humanization of nature, Freud’s eternal fight against nature (another expression for *wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, given the interminable character of the analysis), the idea of nature expressed by Nietzsche in the last pages of his *Will to Power*.

36 See Steiner (2009, p. 46): “*gibt es Benjamin mit seiner Beschreibung des Kapitalismus als Religion nicht um ein Verständnis seines Wesens, sondern seiner Struktur*”. In my opinion, it is necessary to conflate the two points (and so to let the first disappear). Within the German text we find: *essentiell* (twice repeated), the expression *im Wesentlichen* and, once, *Wesen*. Also in these last two cases, however, the adjective or substantive is linked with a word that implies the idea of movement: in the first one *Bewegung*, in the second one *Geschichte*.

as touchstone for its various and different transformations. This does not mean, of course, that these changes do not happen; quite on the contrary: it must be underlined that the only essence of capitalism, if one wants to insist on this point, is to have none, constituting a pure “*Bewegungslogik der Fusion*” (Hamacher, 2009, p. 94)<sup>37</sup>. This does not imply a Benjaminian skeptical stance: this author is instead careful to examine adequately—he applies, in this, sense, the expression “pessimism all along the way” that closes his essay on Surrealism—its dynamic and adaptive structure.

However, given that capitalism has no nature, which kind of relationship does it have *with* nature? It turns out to be, in its *Steigerung*, always bound to this dimension: this is true from three main points of view. Firstly, capitalism is natural in its self-representation<sup>38</sup>; secondly, its rapacious attitude aims at an external or internal/human nature; finally, it encounters in nature its own limit, even if it does not recognize it. For all these reasons, capitalism can be defined, rather than a religion of the collapse (seen as a final and stable result), as a collapsing religion. This adjective does not aim at expressing a prediction; it only tries to sum up the main characteristics of this phenomenon, which we will now try to find within the *Arcades Project*<sup>39</sup>.

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37 This has nothing to do, however, neither with the idea of Z. Bauman of a liquid modernity, nor with the restructuring of capitalism described by Boltanski and Chiappello: it is instead something that precedes both, from a chronological as well as axiological point of view.

38 See Boltanski & Chiappello, 2011, p. 60: “*pour maintenir son pouvoir de mobilisation, le capitalisme va donc devoir aller puiser des ressources en dehors de lui-même, dans les croyances qui possèdent, à un moment donné du temps, un pouvoir important de persuasion*”. I will try to show in the next two paragraphs that this is true about nature, in the 19th as well as in the 21st century.

39 M. Löwy (Löwy, 2009, p. 71), however, states: “in Benjamin’s writings from the 1930s, foremost in the *Passagenwerk*, this topic of capitalism as religion will be replaced by the critique of commodity fetishism, and of capital as a mythical structure. One can certainly point to the affinities between both arguments—for instance, the reference to the religious aspects of the capitalist system—but the differences are also evident: the theoretical framework is now clearly a Marxist one”. I nevertheless believe the same fundamental structure is at work in both contexts.

### III. INTERMEZZO: PARIS – THE GREENHOUSE AND THE PROSTITUTE

In this section, I will concentrate my reading of the *Arcades Project*—which could possibly be viewed as an enormous collection of annotations to *Capitalism as Religion*—, on the relationship between capitalism and nature<sup>40</sup>. I will focus particularly on some significant moments or images: the *passage* and the universal expositions, the role of the *Art Nouveau* within Benjamin's reflections, and the figure of the prostitute. In doing so, I will try to explain the bond that ties the two parts of the title of this paper. The Benjaminian analysis on the city of Paris will not only confirm the aforementioned points, but will also provide us with the quotable elements that will serve as a basis for the similitude I will try to develop in the last part of my discourse.

From within the reflection dedicated to the “dream houses of the collective” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 405), two spaces emerge as particularly meaningful: the *passages* and the universal expositions. The architectural peculiarity of these commercial galleries lies, according to Benjamin, in their structure: an “arcade as nave with side chapels” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 37). They do not represent, however, more than a temporary phase within the general tendency (typical of modernity) towards the construction of comfortable *intérieurs*; or, even a failed experiment soon overtaken by the *grand magasins* and the universal expositions<sup>41</sup>. These commercial galleries, designed as a connection between two streets, where people could enjoy a pleasant walk, looking at the shops without caring about the weather, were not “straight but winding, so that you could never see the end of it” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 205). The lack of

40 A broad and interesting discussion of this topic, of which I can here only sketch some points, can be found in the second part of S. Buck-Morss' *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 47–201).

41 P. Sloterdijk, in his *In the World Interior of Capital* (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 169–176), criticizes Benjamin for his decision to concentrate on the *passages*, which he interprets only as a failed experiment. The chronological succession of these structures with the *magasins de nouveauté* and the universal expositions is however only a part of our reflections: in order to dismiss Sloterdijk's interpretation, it is sufficient to recall the section of the *Arcades Project* dedicated to the figure of the collector, where the *passage* looks completely different from a mere preparatory stage (which it could seem if looking only at section A, for example).

ways out, which is still a dream-like reality in the case of the *passage*, is transformed, after the architectonical revolution of Haussmann, in the *boulevard*, obliged perspective closed by a monument, “a petrified myth” (Gilloch, 1997, p. 72)<sup>42</sup>. The same idea of the connection, although with no end, develops itself in a *panopticon* and into the imprisonment of the whole world under a sky which has become a “splenetic cupola” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 233). The universal expositions, whose most interesting architecture is that of the greenhouse, are an expression of this tendency. The model to which Benjamin makes reference in this case is the Crystal Palace. This structure can, however, assume immediately also another meaning: it is sufficient to recall the fragment where Louis Philippe is said to have “put the republic to grow in a hothouse” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 161). The naturalistic character of this image is however not only metaphorical, given that the Crystal Palace could house some huge secular trees. The “premature synthesis” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 175) of the unprecedented constructive possibilities offered by the new materials, iron and glass, produces here a—vain—attempt at seizing nature. The character of good is indeed extended, within Grandville’s commercials, to Nature as a whole, to the entire universe<sup>43</sup>. From this point of view—here we find a retake of one of the main characteristics of this phenomenon—capitalism shows an undeniable pantheistic tendency<sup>44</sup>. The main issues of this condition are all-inclusiveness as well as distance and unfathomableness. This is true in the first place for the working masses, who during these expositions were not only faced with the “unprecedented level of development” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 180) of the means of production, but were also tamed under the maxim “look at everything; touch nothing” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 201).

This is true, however, also for the *bourgeoisie*, which during the expositions cries out, in a Faustian manner: “abide, you are so fair!” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 355). This exclamation hides however the presentiment—or

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42 On this problem see also Tafuri (1976, p. 1): “to ward off anguish by understanding and absorbing its causes would seem to be one of the principal ethical exigencies of bourgeois art”. It is interesting how this quotation seems to conflate the images of the *Arcades Project* to *Capitalism as Religion*.

43 See Schmiedgen (2009, p. 152): “the *bourgeois* interior is for Benjamin an interior which strives for the appearance of both completeness and fullness”. Once more, architecture repeats what had been already metaphysically described.

44 See Hamacher (2009, p. 103) and Steiner (2009, p. 53). See also S. Weber: “in this [capitalistic] process the dimension of ‘globalization’ is crucial” (S. Weber, 2010, p. 258).

rather, the removed certainty—of the impossibility of keeping under control not simply the development of the means of production, but the consequences of its dominion on nature. Despite the opportunity for this class to acquire an awareness in this sense, the bourgeoisie refuse to do so, preferring the apparent refuge represented by the *Art Nouveau*. Benjamin highlights the tendency of this artistic current to express the stylization of nature and the sterilization of its potentialities. The naturalistic dimension does not represent here an occasion of renewal<sup>45</sup>, but only, at best, a fount of legitimacy and an alibi: a static and separate setting, projectively created as background for the actions of the bourgeoisie. Nature thus, as far as capitalism is concerned, represents something we could define, borrowing Kracauer's expression, as “the last thing before the last”<sup>46</sup>: a penultimate, ideal goal—where “ideal” expresses both the object towards which capitalism inevitably strives, from a material as well as imaginative point of view, and something impossible to reach. This also has a double meaning: the illusion of dominion never to be realized, and the non-existent *definitive* goal of the undetermined character proper of capitalism.

I find it important, then, to notice how another fundamental element of the city of Paris, the prostitute, is removed, contrary to these two precedent moments. This inhabitant *par excellence* of the *passages*, born as a working figure in the same moment of the transformation of work into prostitution, and then, after being expelled from these places, one of the principal causes of their decline, represents “the incarnation of a nature suffused with commodity appearance [...] image of an availability that holds for everyone and is discouraged by none” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 361). This figure is essential precisely because it shows how the extension of capitalism to the whole universe does not represent a moment *successive* to the submission of the essence of nature. It is crucial to notice that these two moments are just two sides of the same coin: Benjamin sees the “triumph” of the commodity “in the fact that nature itself takes on

45 On the contrary, renewal is exactly what is feared here, as in Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, whose main character, the architect Solness, is frightened by the return of a young girl he seduced years before, who threatens his bourgeois life. This work is highly meaningful for Benjamin, who quotes it already in the *Exposé* to the *Arcades Project*: “the consequences of *Jugendstil* are depicted in Ibsen's *Master Builder*” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 9).

46 For a preliminary overview on the conceptual relationship between Benjamin and Kracauer, as well on their differences, see S. Baumann (2014).

a commodity character. It is this commodity appearance [*Warenschein*] of nature that is embodied in the whore” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 345). Nature as a good also means a good as something natural: so, both cases seem to be ruled by the Hegelian principle “essence must appear”—concerning these Benjaminian analyses, *the absence of an essence must appear natural*<sup>47</sup>. From this point of view, it can be said that the universal expositions and the prostitute equally represent two moments of an identic evolution of capitalism. The only difference is that the prostitute is even more decisive and revealing<sup>48</sup>, and thus must be removed by capitalism. In the conclusion of his analysis, Benjamin, once more, seems to recall our opening sentence. Is this just a disenchanting verification or rather a warning? The question still has to be answered: it is now necessary to re-examine the problem from the point of view of *our* generation.

#### IV. BENJAMIN GOES TO EXPO 2015

Within this last paragraph I will try to accomplish two tasks: firstly, to prove in short the characteristics analyzed earlier. This time, however, this will not happen from the point of view of the defensive projection of the 19th century bourgeoisie, but by looking at the current ecological crisis we are experiencing—so, a slightly different meaning of “nature” will be in question. I will then try to sketch an interpretation of *Expo2015* which will be inspired by these Benjaminian categories.

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47 This is something slightly different from Lukacs’ second nature: we are not only talking about the fact that human relationships are reified, but of nature as a (the) source of meaning and legitimacy. According to Benjamin, the essence of nature is not aggressivity, but rather generosity: this, though, must not be interpreted in a *mere* material, but rather in a formal way. “Are not forms the true mystery of nature, which reserves to itself the right to remunerate—precisely through them—the accurate, the objective, the logical solution to a problem posed in purely objective terms?” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 155).

48 The revealing character of the prostitute is due to her ability to reveal the hidden side of the exploitation of nature: “if the human being were not *authentically* exploited, we would be spared the *inauthentic* talk of an exploitation of nature”. Of course Benjamin does not believe in the non-existence of the exploitation of nature, but he condemns this *talk*, which “reinforces the semblance of ‘value’” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 360–361). As N. Bolz has observed, the prostitute embodies the crisis of the capitalist system, and reveals the mythic taboo of the goods (Bolz, 1986, p. 197).

While I will show how *Capitalism as Religion* applies perfectly to this last universal exposition, it will also begin to emerge<sup>49</sup> why Milan can be considered the capital of the 21st century<sup>50</sup>.

I propose, as a working hypothesis, the following minimal definition of capitalism: the present phase of its *Steigerung* consists in the accumulation of the greatest possible amount of the available resources and in a new, qualitatively different, exploitation of nature (which is not, however, *absolutely* different, since this has always been the basis of capitalism). The inevitable awareness of this aggression—no longer towards a background imagined as immobile, but towards the *Umwelt* that surrounds us—is nowadays hidden under false pretences by a religion of consumerism which is extremely attentive to the right valorization of bio-products, for example, and so on. This religion is thus even more faithful to the appearance of naturality we have already encountered; now this assumes another nuance, in order to adapt better to the idea of nature which

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49 This interpretation of *Expo2015* in a Benjaminian optic is nothing but an attempt to confirm the euristic potential of these categories in a confrontation with our present. What I will develop here, however, will consist of less than half of a potential entire work. It would be necessary, in this sense, not only to widen the references to the publications on *Expo2015*, but also, first and foremost, to consider the positive aspects of this event. A good argument to support my attempt can nevertheless be found within the methodological approach of the *Arcades Project*: “with the intensity of a dream, to pass through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers!” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 838). In doing this, Benjamin states: “nothing at all of what we are saying here actually existed. None of it has ever lived—as surely as a skeleton has never lived, but only a man. As surely, however...” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 833). It is decisive, in my opinion, to link these words to the following statement: “... All this, in our eyes, is what the arcades are. And they were nothing of all this” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 87).

50 It is not (yet) possible to state that Milan represents for the XXI century what Paris was for the XIX: why speak of this city as its capital, then? Beyond the reaffirmation of the inevitably partial and non-conclusive nature of this last part of the paper, I think it is possible to give reasons in favour of my choice. Perhaps Milan is not the place where the actual configuration of the capitalistic aggression against nature takes place with the maximum efficacy. This city was nevertheless the seat of an event, *Expo2015*, which, due to its fleeting and apparently dreamlike character, allows us to understand essential aspects of our object of inquiry. Benjamin chose Paris as the capital of the XIX century, although London was at that time by far a more important economic and financial centre. This choice was made in the light of the chance of observing the ruins of capitalism, of a better understanding of this economic system through its evolution, its momentary failures and immediate adaptations (not through its best, fully realized version). Milan can be seen, at least temporarily, as the capital of the XXI century precisely because of the possibility of analyzing a very similar “time differential” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 867). *Expo 2015* was nothing but a moment: a moment, however, capable—due to its density—of casting light on a much vaster range of phenomena.

is actually in question. I would like to recall an element of *Capitalism as Religion*: capitalism is a parasite, which is now becoming (or, better, its evolution goes in this direction) a parasitoid. In other words, this economical system is not only exploiting its host organism, nature, but also—here we find a qualitative difference—eroding the very basis of its own existence<sup>51</sup>. The first characteristic of capitalism, *i.e.* the absence of a theology, remains valid here, given that also (or, particularly) in this case, the aggression towards our environment takes place randomly, simply through the ceaseless celebrating of the cult of consumerism<sup>52</sup>. The pervasiveness of this behaviour and of its consequences are evident from an extensive-quantitative perspective: given the *systemic* alterations which our planet undergoes, the very idea of a place exempted by them would be a kind of *contradictio in adiecto*. One also has to consider this problem, though, from an intensive-qualitative point of view: I think it is possible here to borrow Serge Latouche's expression and to talk of a colonization of the imaginary<sup>53</sup>. Capitalism takes place not only *sans trêve et sans merci*, but also *sans rêve*<sup>54</sup>, given the absence both of concrete and utopic alternatives to the present situation and the difficulties in finding a correct attitude between the opposites of catastrophism and the removal of the ecological problems from our considerations. The indebted (*verschuldend*) character of this system is confirmed by the fact that the celebration of this cult not only inflicts other wounds on

51 It would be more correct to say that capitalism acts as a parasite which believes itself to be a parasitoid—of being able to survive autonomously after having killed or sterilized his host organism. In this sense, nature represents once more the ultimate limit for capitalism. I do not want to say, however, that this system is approaching its end, but rather that its next evolutions will more than probably add a further chapter to a Benjaminian “tradition of the oppressed”.

52 Benjamin, in the second version of *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 107), reminds us that cult and (human) sacrifice are inseparable from each other. In the final paragraph of this work we read: “Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in ‘human material’ for the natural material society has denied it” (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 121–122).

53 According to S. Latouche, in front of the colonization process and of the “*misère psychique et morale des humains contemporains*” there is the necessity of a “*véritable décolonisation de notre imaginaire* [...] *Il faut commencer par voir les choses autrement pour qu’elles puissent devenir autres*” (Latouche, 2004, p. 115).

54 As noticed by various scholars (see for example S. Weber, 2010, p. 255), Benjamin—who writes *sans rêve et sans merci*—probably refers here to a verse of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens* (where we read *sans trêve*). Both versions have their own meaning, as I have shown, be it that of the ceaseless celebration or that of the dominance of capitalism in the semantic sphere.

Nature, but also further deepens what could be seen as *ecological fault* (Chelazzi, 2013). It seems to me particularly interesting, then, that the actual phase of capitalism produces a situation where despair and hope intertwine, where the God of this cult finally manifests itself, after being not yet mature for that, not yet involved enough in this process of destruction of being. Is it not true that a reference to the God of this cult—let us remember that here adoration and indebtedness-destruction *convertuntur*—, that is nature, is made only when it is already too late? However, one should say: when it is going to be already too late—here the procrastination typical of capitalism finds its basis. The system of nature is not yet collapsed, but *is collapsing*—a situation with which capitalism, as I have showed, has an elective affinity.

Would it not be possible, starting from these Benjaminian coordinates, to look at *Expo2015* as the last and ultimate expression—at least for our generation—of the capitalistic cult? A good reason for this choice is immediately evident: the very disposition of this exposition. Expo's two main axes, *Cardo* and *Decumano*<sup>55</sup>, present two important characteristics already highlighted: on the one hand the structure of the *passage*—a commercial gallery with side shops<sup>56</sup>—, on the other hand that of the boulevard—an obliged perspective, closed by a monument. Located at the end of the *Cardo*, the Tree of Life, “*which is, at one and the same time, a monument, a sculpture, an installation, a building, and a work of art*”<sup>57</sup>, is particularly significant. It is hard to avoid the impression of being in front of something that plays a similar role to the Victory

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55 The map of *Expo2015* can be viewed and downloaded at <http://www.Expo2015.org/archive/it/esplora.html#map-lake-arena> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015). *Expo2015*'s website has been greatly modified many times in the last few months, losing much of its content. This, of course, is no responsibility of the paper's author. All the images to which I make reference in this final section (such as *Expo2015*'s map, the mascot, the Tree of Life, and the installations of Dante Ferretti) can be easily found, however, on the web through any search engine—and are referred to in some of the links contained in the following footnotes [added on September 28<sup>th</sup> 2016].

56 In many of the pavilions of this exposition one could easily be given the impression of finding himself in a tourist office of the promoting country—in a marketplace of its artisan, artistic and natural excellences. Often the visit to the pavilion ended by going through a shop, as if the decisive *quid* finally revealed itself. It is interesting to notice, in support of this interpretation, how these shops were the only part of the pavilion accessible without queues.

57 This text comes from <http://www.Expo2015.org/en/explore/exhibition-site/lake-arena> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, italics mine). Images of the Tree of Life and Lake

Column of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, i.e. a celebration of a victory that hides the descent to hell of nature, this time<sup>58</sup>. The opening towards the high of the Tree of Life echoes the covering of the exposition, which is half-open<sup>59</sup>. The basic shared idea seems to me the following: we do not have to fear something from Nature, we need no longer a screen against it (such was the glass covering of the greenhouse); since we are inserted within it, we can enjoy its generosity: it is sufficient to collaborate with it. This is one of the possible meanings of the installation by the Academy Award winner scenographer Dante Ferretti along the Decumano, representing the different areas of a market<sup>60</sup>. This, once more, is a Benjaminian image: in the sketch *Market Hall of Berlin Childhood* we find a description of this place, whose main characters are "slow-moving market women [...] priestesses of a venal Ceres, purveyors of all fruits of the field and orchard, all edible birds, fishes, and mammals" (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 362)<sup>61</sup>. The inclusion of the world in the global interior of this capital finds maybe a slight exception

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Arena can be found for example at <https://www.google.it/search?tbm=isch&q=tree+of+life+expo+2015+lake+arena> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015).

- 58 "What could possibly come after Sedan anyway? With the defeat of the French, world history seemed to be safely interred in its glorious grave, and this column was the funery stele" (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 348). Another interesting Benjaminian image could be in this sense the Tree of Knowledge in Earthly Paradise, as it is present in the essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*. Also in this case (for a deep analysis of this essay see for example Fenves, 2001) the Tree raises more problems than it solves: "the Tree of Knowledge stood in the garden of God not in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner" (Benjamin, 2004, p. 72). This shows us, in my opinion, two points: firstly, natural (material or linguistic, as it is sketched in this essay of Benjamin) exploitation produces this kind of images. Secondly, this happens *post* (ecological) *peccatum*, within an already collapsing situation.
- 59 See <http://www.lmv.it/it/galleria/progetti-in-corso/progetti-in-corso-edifici/item/58-expo-2015-tensostrutture-di-copertura> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015).
- 60 "Along the Decumano, the designer has created eight works especially for the Universal Exposition. These make up the installation entitled '*Il Mercato*' where Ferretti lauds Italian food production by rebuilding market stalls filled with typical products on the themes of wine, vegetables, fruit, spices, bread, fish, meat and cheeses" (text from <http://www.Expo2015.org/en/news/president-sergio-mattarella-inaugurates-the-works-of-dante-ferretti-at-expo-milano-2015>, consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015). Images of this installation can be found for example at <https://www.google.it/search?q=dante+ferretti+il+mercato+images&espv=2&biw=1024&bih=508&tbm=isch> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015).
- 61 According to this image it seems still possible to think that the generosity of nature is able to overcome human exploitation. This however must not be interpreted as a safe-conduct, but rather only as a part, maybe not the most important one, of Benjamin's reasoning.

in the clusters where some small countries were gathered, in areas less visited than the other bigger pavilions, and with a different layout. These seem to recall the little squares of Paris, which “do not enjoy the patronage of world history” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 516) mentioned by Benjamin, but are effectively equally irrelevant to the capital (in its double sense) as a whole.

Approaching my conclusion, my general impression during my visit to *Expo2015* was that of crossing a mausoleum. A particular one, not only conceived in order to sell more/better thanks to the fount of legitimacy/alibi represented by Nature, but also, at least implicitly, to remember it in the very moment of its disappearance (it is sufficient to recall the Sixth Extinction as hallmark of the Holocene). I found particularly interesting, from a Benjaminian point of view, one of the halls of the Zero Pavilion of the UN: here the visitors can find a huge library, *The Archives of Memory*, where “each drawer corresponds symbolically to a food, an animal, a food practice”<sup>62</sup>. This closely recalls an image of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* (*Spleen*): “*J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans. / Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans [...] C’est une pyramide, un immense caveau, / qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune*” (Baudelaire, 1918, p. 111). Is not the topic of memory crucial for Benjamin’s thinking? In this context we find two main options concerning memory: on the one hand that just quoted from Baudelaire, *i.e.* the melancholic proliferation of the *souvenirs* (equally superficial memories or memento for a visit to this exposition). On the other hand, but strictly tied to it, the Proustian possibility of getting lost inside the labyrinth of memory, a Penelope’s tapestry—as Benjamin observes in his

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62 See <http://virtual.Expo2015.org/?go=pavilion-zero&language=EN> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015). It is possible here to have a virtual tour around the whole Zero Pavilion of the UN (images of the library and of the tree can however be found through any search engine). I cannot here further examine this structure, for example considering that “the archive of memory recalls Agostino’s vision: past, present and future all coexist in the soul”. The risk of such a position is the lack of political decision—in Agostino’s terms, a return not as an end in itself, but aiming at a *conversio*; in Benjamin’s terms, an *Umkehr*. Within this pavilion, the presence of *another* Tree of Life must also be recognized: “a large old tree stretching toward the roof depicts the confines of time, and nature’s resistance to change”. This surely represents clearly an attempt to develop a different perspective from that of the universal expositions examined by Benjamin and of the Tree of Life encountered earlier. Also in this case, however, we are faced by a *Schein* of naturality: this tree was indeed artificial.

essay *Zum Bilde Prousts*—both of memory and of oblivion<sup>63</sup>. A possible escape from this dilemma would be a consideration of the image that closes Baudelaire’s poem, *i.e.* the sphynx: “*Désormais tu n’es plus, ô matière vivante, / Qu’un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante, / Assoupi dans le fond d’un Sabarab brumeux, / – Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux*” (Baudelaire, 1918, p. 112). It is necessary to ask ourselves if this figure and the enigma<sup>64</sup> it represents (I would say, the relationship between Man and Nature), just like the prostitute, are still present and urgent for us. Indeed, this is my opinion: it is sufficient to look at another composite figure, *Expo2015*’s mascot Foody, inspired by Arcimboldo’s works<sup>65</sup>. Out of metaphors: for Benjamin the sphynx embodied the condition of a matter twice dead, because it is inorganic<sup>66</sup> and excluded by the process of production and distribution of the goods. Would it not be possible to see Foody playing a similar role, representing the illusion of a harmonious coexistence between capitalism and the cycles of nature<sup>67</sup>? Is this not once again *Art nouveau*? The prostitute hid the secret of 19th century capitalism, and for this reason was expelled from the Passages. Does this smiling figure hide in full view a similar secret of our times, as in Poe’s *The stolen letter*?

63 Both of these options lack the authentic characteristics of the Benjaminian *Eingedenken*: “*die Erinnerung verfährt ‘konstruktiv’ [...] sie bringt die Geschichte zum ‘Stillstand’ [...] sie ist ‘destruktiv’ [...] sie ‘zitiert’ die Geschichte [...] sie verfährt ‘monadologisch’ [...] und sie verfährt ‘rettend’*” (Schöttker, 1999, p. 284).

64 This enigma of the sphynx, as T. Morton has highlighted, is always a *de te fabula narratur* (Morton, 2012).

65 Images of Foody, *Expo2015*’s mascot, can be found for example at <https://www.google.it/search?tbm=isch&q=Expo2015+foody+images&cad=h> (consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015). The threatening side of this figure appears evident as soon as one looks at the other installation of Dante Ferretti for *Expo2015*, *I guardiani del cibo* (The guardians of the food), statues representing men and women (sometimes armed) made up of different foods (see for example <https://www.google.it/search?q=ferretti+i+guardiani+del+cibo+images&espv=2&biw=1024&bih=508&tbm=isch>, consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2015).

66 See Benjamin, 2002, p. 354.

67 *Ad abundantiam*: the mascot too, just like the whole *Expo2015*, should be analyzed more in depth than I was able to do here. The initiatives conceived for children within (or linked to) *Expo2015* would be of particular interest in this sense: “every childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity”; “Task of childhood: to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact, can do what the grownup absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again [...] Every childhood discovers these new images in order to incorporate them into the image stock of humanity” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 461 and 390). For a passionate manifesto of the values that Expo has (should have) defended see Shiva, 2015.

It seems much more probable, rather than a harmonious coexistence, that *Expo2015* foreshadows (just like the universal expositions analyzed by Benjamin) a sudden awakening, represented by resource wars<sup>68</sup>. This, however, is not to give capitalism up for dead: it seems, quite on the contrary, much-advanced in its adaptation to this situation, looking at both the world superpowers' behavior and the inertia of politicians in dealing with these problems. So, I am left with a simple critical verification: "the experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death". With these words I opened this paper, and now I finally return to them. Even without considering our age as one of decadence<sup>69</sup>, it still remains necessary to remember that "before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut". Our hope seems, in this sense, hopeless, "and yet she is winged. Nothing is more true" (Benjamin, 2004, p. 470–471).

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68 See Klare, 2002, p. 25: "*resource wars*" is the definition for "conflicts that revolve, to a significant degree, over the pursuit or possession of critical materials". "Human history has been marked by a long succession of resource wars"; however, "the incidence of conflict over vital materials is sure to grow".

69 See Benjamin, 2002, p. 458.

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