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**Sabbath as Post-Christian Education:  
The (De)valuing of Rural Working-Class Persons as Liberation from Socio-economic  
Disposability**

Abstract

*The rural working-class in the United States faces many unique struggles in the face of global consumer capitalism. This paper explores the possibilities of Giorgio Agamben's concept of Sabbath as state of inoperativity for the creation of a Christian education which moves toward a devaluing or removal rural working-class from the current economy of consumption and disposal. In conjunction with Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, Agamben's Sabbath allows for the possibility of glimpsing an alternative existence than the present oppressive state and attempting to actively pursue that alternative. Sabbath is defined in a broad post-Christian manner which allows for the creation of new potentials within and connected to the rural communities, traditions, and practices.*

A dandelion is a weed. Historically it has many uses and benefits, and biologists continue to find new interesting properties.<sup>1</sup> Still for most it is still a weed; it detracts from the attractiveness of lawns, it leaches nutrients from the soil which could nourish the grass, and it spreads easily from place to place. There is an entire chemical industry built around eliminating dandelions and other unwanted plants from otherwise picturesque lawns. Much like the dandelion, rural working-class communities in the United States are often labeled as a nuisance to the rest of the country. Rural education researcher, Craig Howley writes, "For centuries, rural people and rural communities have served as the standard of backwardness for the entire industrializing world. To smug inhabitants of the cosmopolitan mainstream, this history makes it seem wasteful to engage intellectual matters among ordinary rural people (aka rednecks)."<sup>2</sup> That is, rural working-class people are weeds. Greater society often appears to be starving out these weeds. The USDA reports continued decline in average income among rural families, continued growth in income disparity between urban and rural communities, and slow employment growth

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the positive and negative attributes of dandelions see: Stewart-Wade, S. M.; Neuman, S.; Collins, L. L.; and Boland, G. J. "The biology of Canadian weeds. 117. *Taraxacum officinale* G. H. Weber ex Wiggers" *Canadian Journal of Plant Science*. 82, no.4 (Winter 2002): 825-853, (accessed September 3, 2014). <http://pubs.aic.ca/doi/pdf/10.4141/P01-010>.

<sup>2</sup> Howley, Craig, B. "The Meaning of Rural Difference for Bright Rednecks." *Journal For The Education Of The Gifted* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 537-564. *Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 10, 2013) 539-540.

due to lack of manufacturing, healthcare, and tourism employment opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Tex Sample notes that corporations constantly seek out the most efficient and profitable materials, labor, and means of distribution, thus rural Americans face the brunt of the loss, due to the concentration of profit and employment in major metropolitan areas due to easier accessibility to affordable transportation of goods as well as a much larger market for distribution.<sup>4</sup> Furthering this thread, Henry Giroux claims many persons and populations are considered disposable and hidden from public view through media backed predatory consumer capitalism. This allows for a hyper-individualism, making it socially acceptable to blame the “disposable” population.<sup>5</sup> Any group society consistently treats as a weed eventually internalizes these messages. Craig Howley writes: “To keep breathing the rural air is, in part, to breathe in the acknowledgement of this state of affairs, and the allegations of one’s own inferiority.”<sup>6</sup>

In order to forge an alternative to the evaluation of these communities as inferior weeds and burdens to society, I propose, not a revaluing, but instead a devaluing of these communities. By devaluing, I do not mean a reduction of value, but instead removing the mechanism and function of valuation from these communities. It is the role of Christian religious education to facilitate this process of devaluing of persons and communities. Giorgio Agamben’s concept of Sabbath placed in conversation with Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed allows for the creation of a pedagogy of devaluing rural communities, beginning the liberation from the grips a society which labels them as weeds in order to move toward new possibilities of existence in the twenty-first century.

### **Origins of Disposable Communities**

As I note earlier, greater society has been marginalizing rural working-class communities for centuries. This evaluation of the rural working-class grows out of global capitalism’s desire to globalize and homogenize society into one standard model of consumer. Craig Howley calls this the “one-best-way to live,” which he describes as suburban, middle-class, professionalism.<sup>7</sup> Rural public schools and media outlets, while operating as a “talent-extraction industry,” fueled

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<sup>3</sup> U.S Department of Agriculture, *Rural America at a Glance: 2012 Edition*. By Lorin Kusmin. (accessed: 29 May 2013). Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eb-economic-brief/eb21.aspx#UaYoYWOnbD3>.

<sup>4</sup> Sample, Tex. *Blue-Collar Ministry: Facing Economic and Social Realities of Working People*. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984). 36-38.

<sup>5</sup> Giroux, Henry. *On Critical Pedagogy*. (New York: Continuum, 2011) 90-92.

<sup>6</sup> Howley, Craig. “The Meaning of Rural Difference.” 540.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 543-545.

by capitalist intentions, promote individualistic personal success and consistently label family, community, and tradition as disposable.<sup>8</sup>

Henry Giroux writes that this individualistic and consumeristic education creates: “Privatized utopias of consumerist society [which] offer the public a market-based language that produces narrow modes of subjectivity, defining what people should know and how they should act.”<sup>9</sup> He further explains that this education not only disrupts social and communal bonds, but creates a worldview of individual responsibility; a worldview which generates a social acceptance blaming the disposable parties for their own plight while refusing to take into account the complex socio-economic injustices which this individualistic consumerist creates.<sup>10</sup>

The ramifications of this lifestyle of consumerism and disposability are enormous. Katherine Turpin notes that consumption merged with capitalism creates a religious-like way of making meaning.<sup>11</sup> This consumerism leads, John Francis Kavanaugh explains, to an understanding of persons as product, “The person *is* only insofar as he or she is marketable or productive.”<sup>12</sup> Turpin further continues along the religious lines of consumerism:

Each day we encounter thousands of discrete commercial messages...This onslaught of marketing engages us in an ongoing process of formation, not just in particular brand loyalties or the production taste, but also in deeper questions of meaning and purpose that used to be relegated to families, communities and religious experiences.<sup>13</sup>

This consumerism is not simply selling products; it is selling identity, lifestyle, and narrative. Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne note the impact of media on children, explaining that the television, consumer products, and even educational standards currently directed toward children are designed to market a lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> This leads to what Diane Levin calls Problem-Solving Deficit Disorder (PSDD), which, “Describes the condition in which children are no longer active agents of their own involvement with the world...In the long run, it can lead to remote-controlled people who exhibit conformist behavior, accept orders without question, and miss out on the joy

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 539.

<sup>9</sup> Giroux, Henry. *On Critical Pedagogy*. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Turpin, Katherine. “Consuming,” in Miller-McClemore, Bonnie J. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* Kindle Edition. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). Kindle Location (KL) 2896.

<sup>12</sup> Kavanaugh, John Francis. *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Turpin, Katherine, “Consuming.” Kindle Location 2897.

<sup>14</sup> Levin, Diane. E. and Kilbourne, Jean. *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do To Protect Their Kids*. (New York: Ballantine Books: 2009). 66.

[of play].”<sup>15</sup> Levin and Kilbourne provide an educational and formational understanding of the experience consumerism. They even go as far as to say that this PSDD can and does lead to what they call Compassion Deficit Disorder.<sup>16</sup> Compassion Deficit Disorder emerges as individuals continue to treat themselves and others as objects or commodities for consumption or service. If a person does not fit the commercially prescribed lifestyle, they are often discarded like a broken toy or a CD of music you no longer like. And just as Kavanaugh says, persons not only treat others as commodities, they treat themselves as commodities for sale and use.

For the rural working-class community, this self-evaluation can often lead to despair and desperation as they can never fully live up to the one-best-way no matter their struggle. When these communities are unwilling or unable to call on the often traditional rural values of community, cooperation, resourcefulness, and improvisation due to the effects of problem-solving deficit disorder, the despair deepens. Furthermore, those who resist this middle-class consumer culture, also often into despair and lament in the face of what appears to be an impossible struggle. Therefore, an alternative pedagogy of devaluing of persons in order to create new potential for rural working-class communities is necessary.

### **An Alternative to Disposability**

Paulo Freire calls this form of evaluation of persons: dehumanization. He writes that this oppressive process is a distortion of the true vocation to become more fully human.<sup>17</sup> This form of education, he names as the banking method of education, assumes absolute ignorance of students, subjects, or consumers, and the teacher (be that classroom, movie, billboard, employer, etc), deposits knowledge about the world into their brain, creating a lifestyle to live, rules to follow, and desires to fulfill.<sup>18</sup> Authentic human vocation requires a freedom from these oppressive and divisive formational powers. However, Freire explains, “The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?”<sup>19</sup> He points toward a pedagogy of the oppressed which begins with the opening up of a perception of reality in which the oppressed no longer see themselves in a closed off world with a set path of consumption, production, despair, and disposal. They instead begin to understand that they can transform their current situation and take action toward

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<sup>15</sup> Levin, Diane. E. “Problem-Solving Deficit Disorder: Programmed Play in Korea and the United States,” in *Where do the Children Play? A Field Guide to the Film* 137-141, Elizabeth Goodenough (College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood 2010) 139.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

<sup>17</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 1970/1993) 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 74-75.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 48.

this transformation.

Freire's concept of transformation is not simply integration or revaluing of persons to better fit into a society which treats all people as "beings for others," but a restructuring of the entire system creating "beings for themselves."<sup>20</sup> Not Sabbath as a day off, a day to honor God, or a day to go to church, but more so as a state of inoperativity. In the essay, "Hunger of an Ox: Considerations on the Sabbath, the Feast, and Inoperativity." Giorgio Agamben explores this topic as he writes:

The feast day par excellence of the Jews--for whom it is the paradigm of faith (*yesod ha-emunah*) and in some way for archetype for every day of celebration---finds its theological paradigm in the fact that it is not the work of creation, but rather the cessation of all work that is declared sacred...The condition of the Jews during the Sabbath is thus called *menuchah*...that is to say, inoperativity.<sup>21</sup>

Inoperativity, the cessation of all production, in the observance of Sabbath holds eschatological and messianic potential for Agamben. It is not simply an abstention disconnected from the rest of the week, but instead corresponds to the eschatological fulfillment of the commandments and provides a glimpse of the Messianic Kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

The Sabbath, and any other feast, is thus not marked by what is not done but by the idea that what is done (which may be similar to what is done on any regular day), becomes Agamben writes, "Undone, rendered inoperative, liberated and suspended from its 'economy,' from the reasons and aims that define it during the weekdays."<sup>23</sup> Sabbath provides the potential for a glimpse of human potential outside of the confines of the oppressive economy of production, labor, and consumption. Perhaps Agamben's most interesting example is that of dance, which transforms the productive action of the human body into the something new and unexpected outside the realm of production and consumption, outside of value.<sup>24</sup>

### **(De)valuing the Disposable**

This devaluing of the rural working class through Sabbath inoperativity allows for a new existence in the world, a salvation. For Jean-Luc Nancy, salvation involves an opening up to the other and a revaluing or devaluing of self (and all others) within the world. It is not escape from

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). 104.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 112.

this world or promise of another world to come, instead, Nancy writes: “It restores us to the world, and it sets (us) into the world anew, as new.”<sup>25</sup> It is disconnected from the values and measures of the present world of consumerism, individualism, and capitalism, and therefore allows for engaging the world (and persons in the world) anew, without value and measurement.

This devaluing salvation is perhaps better spelled (de)valuing as a value is being acknowledged, but it is an irreplaceable heterogeneous value. Nancy points to the realization of death (of self or other) as the realization of the homogenous value of individuals, due to the fact that only a person can die their own death, no one can die it for them. Within his writing, Nancy will even call this realization or salvation, “resurrection.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, as individuals begin to experience (de)valuation they begin to no longer be subject to the valuation of global capitalism, which for the rural working-class is disposability. This new concept of value can lead toward the new possibilities Agamben suggests in relation to Sabbath inoperativity and the ability to name and change the world that is key to Freire’s pedagogical method of becoming “beings for self.”<sup>27</sup>

While the terms mentioned above such as Sabbath and salvation clearly have Judeo-Christian overtones, I title this paper, “Sabbath as Post-Christian Education,” intentionally. My understanding of post-Christian is not an abandonment of Christianity or rejection of Christianity. Instead I refer to the movement of Christianity into a new way existing, a Christianity which grows out of the current or modern Christianity but begins to operate in different ways. It appears Bonhoeffer begins exploring this idea in a letter on April 30, 1944: “If religion is only a garment of Christianity--and even this garment has looked very different at different times--then what is a religionless Christianity?”<sup>28</sup> As he continues, he acknowledges the impact of a religionless Christianity on Christian practices: “What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? How do we speak of God--without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on?”<sup>29</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy further nuances a post-Christian understanding of existence. As he works toward a deconstruction of Christianity, he writes that “[The] redeemer is he who founds no religion, who does not proclaim a god, who demands no belief in any doctrine, or in any type of belief. He is the one whose faith is a behavior, not the adherence to a message.”<sup>30</sup> For Nancy,

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<sup>25</sup> Nancy, Jean Luc, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity I*. Kindle Edition (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008) KL 1678.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*. Kindle Edition (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013) KL 1077.

<sup>27</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 88.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge, Tr. Reginald Fuller, Revised Tr. Frank Clarke, et al. (New York: The Macmillian Co, 1953, 1967), 140.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 141.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy, Jean Luc. *Dis-Enclosure*. KL 1657.

salvation arises not in founding a religion or a belief system or connection to a transcendent force, this salvation frees humans of the value systems of the world through highlighting his understanding of salvation mentioned above.

In developing an understanding of post-Christian education, I find both the historical and contemporary practices of Christianity helpful. Sabbath as post-Christian education, does not teach persons to honor the Sabbath for the sake of pleasing or worshipping God, but instead for the sake of rendering themselves inoperative within the current economy in order to allow for new ways existing and naming the world. Throughout history and literature, states of inoperativity have allowed for new and unexpected relation to form. Feast and inoperativity play particularly interesting roles in the works of William Shakespeare. In his tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, the masquerade ball renders inoperative through feast (at least for a time) the identities and socially ascribed values of Romeo and Juliet allowing for them to engage each outside the value system of hate and malice their two families share for each other.<sup>31</sup>

While a masquerade party works well within the world of Shakespeare's Verona, rural working class communities might utilize celebrations from within their own community. Agamben suggests Halloween, naming it as a feast in which children impersonate the dead (or other fantastical characters) and small gifts of candy and sometimes baked goods, fruit, and nuts rendered inoperative of their exchange value through the feast, are given as gifts to the children.<sup>32</sup> From my personal experience, Halloween in rural small towns allows for a (de)valuing of time. Instead of quickly running from door to door collecting as much of the free gifts which take on an obvious consumer value for the children, my parents and others in my community took the holiday as opportunity to visit one another and check in on family and friends, they rarely saw throughout the year. Our parents would then sit and talk often for ten or fifteen minutes, we would get our treats and be back in the car. This was a common occurrence in our community.

While not expecting rural communities to emulate my personal experience, I do see the potential in rendering inoperative the economy around similar festivals, events, and traditions, and then taking action based on experiences within these events. However, within contemporary society, Agamben warns readers that persons and communities have often lost the ability to truly be festive and while we observe the feast, we are not actually celebrating or rendering inoperative the event.<sup>33</sup> Persons observe the feast days within an economy of nostalgia, conformity, and production, missing the point of the Sabbath aspects of feast days.

Instead of directly engaging holidays tainted with the values of nostalgic tradition and commercialism which preys upon this nostalgia, I find potential within the lyrics of country

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<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1. Scene 5. The New Folger Library Edition, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 51-61.

<sup>32</sup> Agamben, *Nudities*, 111.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 106.

music. Contemporary country artist, Kip Moore sings, “Beer Money.”<sup>34</sup> The song begins with lament over the working-class employee’s experience in a rural small town, and the singer’s desire to for a night to be free of the values of this small town. The lyrics read:

Tonight, Tonight,  
Baby, we're drinkin';  
Let's wake the town that never stops sleeping,  
You got the kiss that tastes like honey  
And I got a little beer money.<sup>35</sup>

They continue:

In a field, where we can scream,  
Get away with almost anything,  
Yeah, every now and then you gotta raise a little hell,  
Hope we get lucky and stay out of jail.<sup>36</sup>

Moore creates the potential for a Sabbath activity of escaping the value system of employers, as well as the greater community and society. Within in this moment inoperativity they glimpse the potential of a (de)valued life, where they are not disposable pawns in a dangerous system.

### **Toward a Post-Christian Education**

Post-Christian education must find ways of engaging these bonfires, parties, and cookouts as opportunities for Sabbath. A Sabbath that is not simply a time of repose or escape but instead is directly connected to the rest of life. Agamben writes, “What is essential here is a dimension of praxis, in which simple, quotidian human activities are neither negated nor abolished, but rendered inoperative in order to be exhibited, as such, in a festive manner.”<sup>37</sup> He further explains that this inoperative is experience in order to open human activities up to new (de)valued ways existing even with the existing economy of productivity. Combined with Freire’s problem-posing education, which affirms human beings in the process of becoming, the potential for a post-Christian education of (de)valuing emerges.

The observance of Sabbath festivities as a community allows for an eschatological revelation of what is to come. This view of the messianic potential of the Sabbath allows for the

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<sup>34</sup> Moore, Kip; Davis, Blair; & Verges, Troy. “Beer Money.” Performed by Kip Moore on *Up all Night*. (MCA: Nashville, 2012) CD and Digital Download.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *Nudities*. 112.

unveiling of potential within the present economy of consumption and disposability. Action in response to Sabbath allows for a reworking of how individuals and communities interact with the world. Freire points out that this renaming and reworking never ends; persons and reality are always in the in the process of becoming. Therefore, the juxtaposition of Sabbath inoperativity (eschatological completion) with the process of creation, inaugurates a perpetual cycle of action and reflection moving toward human freedom. As rural working-class people practice Sabbath, they realize they are not the weeds on society's lawn. They instead begin to (de)value themselves, change the world around them, and work toward their own liberation. Just as dandelions, free from its role as pest can become a means of spreading new life as it seeds, blown in the wind, float on toward new possibilities, rural working-class communities create and shape their world, liberated from disposability.

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