

**Selling Christianity: Megachurches,
Megatheory, Markets, and Class at the Turn
of the 21st Century
- In Homage to Richard Ohmann -**

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*What is our business? Who is our customer? What does our customer value?*¹

We are very much risk-takers; we are innovative; we are entrepreneurial," [...] "But guess what? Jesus was innovative and entrepreneurial, as was John Wesley. So, unlike some pastors, I don't view that as a scriptural stretch or as an anti-spiritual orientation. I think some churches obviously feel that their activities should be restricted to Sundays, and that economic development should be left to another sector. I don't buy that.²

—Kirbyjon Caldwell

At beginning of *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*, Richard Ohmann asks: "What does mass culture do, in and to societies like ours?" (11) He answers his question in this particular work, of course, with an exploration of how print media helped shape public attitudes and behaviors at the beginning of the 20th century. Yet his question is applicable to much more than studies of print. His model—one that is historically based, critically theorized, and action driven—can and should be applied to phenomena at the beginning of the 21st century as well. An Ohmannesque discussion of the nature of "mass culture"—what it does, what it's capable of, how it functions—lends itself nicely to what contemporary theorists have called the "multitude" or "common" during the past ten years. Further, I argue that Ohmann's method helps to uncover a surprisingly nascent and powerful instance of mass culture in America today: entrepreneur-

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ial evangelicalism, otherwise known as the American megachurch. Today's megachurch experience is a burgeoning, large scale, contemporary worship venue, one that is being replicated in suburbs all over America. Megachurches are, by definition, churches that have more than 2,000 members and base their growth on business or market models. The megachurch is designed to attract and acquire mass culture en masse. While Richard Ohmann explains mass culture in terms of print media, I use his model to shed light on the institutional structure of the American megachurch. This article will also show how an Ohmannesque model is more effective than those of other theorists—such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt—who merely look at the revolutionary capability of the neoliberal multitude. Hardt and Negri's multitude consists of groups of seemingly disparate people who, politically or not, band together irrespective of class status, to work toward a common goal. In contrast, I argue that using Ohmann's method helps elucidate the ways in which the "multitude" is being harnessed by and intentionally mobilized (for example, within 15,000+ member strong suburban congregations across the country) into a class that Hardt and Negri don't account for: the Professional Managerial Class. In short, Ohmann's query about how mass culture is formed sheds light on a growing, powerful multitude or common—the American megachurch—one that we would be remiss to ignore. Looking at this 21st century phenomenon through Ohmann's lens helps us see that the optimism that fueled mass culture at the beginning of the 20th century is similar to what fuels the systems of democracy, evangelicalism, and capitalism today. As I will pick up later, capitalism allows for the rational organization of labor that leads to material accumulation. In democracy, material accumulation (or property rights) hypothetically leads to equal representation. And finally, in Christianity, equal representation, we are told, is only possible through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Those running today's megachurches have figured out how to capitalize on the imbrication of these three systems, and the 740 churches now present in America are proof that that this combination works.

I contend, then, that megachurches should not be dismissed as any less socio-economically or politically influential than megamalls, megatrends, megabytes, or any other postmodern phenomenon. Today's megachurches are creating a particular brand of mass culture. My purpose in this exploration is to 1) lift the discussion of the American megachurch out of its cloistered, suburbanized private realm and bring it into the public sphere; and to 2) demonstrate that Richard Ohmann—unlike Hardt and Negri—provides us with an astute explanation for why the megachurch phenomenon has arisen, and why the idea of a multiplicitous multitude is not necessarily always something to be celebrated. In so doing, I hope to explain the megachurch as a key mechanism driving neoliberal society.

To ground my claims about the megachurch phenomenon, I will not rely merely on personal conjecture and recent news articles, but also on a mapping of historical rhetorical and political texts that trace the conditions providing the socio-cultural space for

neoliberalism's American megachurch, in much the same manner that Ohmann approaches his study of print culture in the 20th century. Ohmann's method, specifically, offers us five crucial lenses through which to do so: 1) historicity; 2) the importance of mass audience to mass culture; 3) the structure and creation of class feeling among the professional managerial class (PMC); 4) the importance of place—in this case, the suburbs—in creating mass culture; and 5) the importance of landing theoretically in a place that not only explains the past, helps us understand the future, but also catapults us toward envisioning plausible future actions.

One need not look far in the news to see examples of what "faith-based organizations" have done in our contemporary political/economic climate. Nor can we ignore the publicly traded companies, such as Kingdom Ventures, whose sole purpose is to help faith-based organizations grow in size and influence.³ My point here is to emphasize that while megacompanies such as Wal-Mart and Time Warner have always remained a point of concern for leftists, little has been said about the equally powerful economic movements taking place "in the name of the Lord." If nothing else, these movements and institutions should give us pause, precisely because arguments such as those of Hardt and Negri lend support to the potential of these same multitudes. But as Ohmann suggests, we cannot and should not remain stuck here. We need to look to the past and then turn our thoughts to the future. This is the point of critical scholarship. For, as has been argued elsewhere by other theorists, Ohmann's scholarship and activist work is an imbrication of history, sociology, economic analysis and criticism.⁴ As Janice Radway puts it: "Ohmann's most profound engagement, then, is with the nature of the present as a *link* between past and future. His writing nearly always contains a double promise; it promises to remember the past and its effects in the present even as it also promises to use that knowledge to fashion a desirable future" (*Politics of Knowledge* viii). I hope to use his method as a guide for doing what he does so well: lifting us out of the paralysis of skepticism and into the realm of possibility. And I think, because at this moment the Lakewood Church is spending 95 million dollars to make the Houston Compaq center its home, that the timing for an analysis of how the mass culture of megachurches has arisen could not be more pertinent.

I extrapolate from Ohmann's work to show how and why this rising phenomenon of megachurches is an elaboration of mass culture and consumer capitalism. His work has always sought to explicate instances of culture as reified through consumerism. As he has argued: "like mind and body, mass culture and advanced capitalism evolved together" (*Selling Culture* 12). For Ohmann, it is of the utmost importance to find the foundational moments where the symbiotic relationship of capitalism and mass culture is most observable. I argue that the 20,000 member churches—replete with cappuccino bars, book and music stores, food courts, conference grounds, and hotel accommodations—springing up in suburbs all over America reveal a similar foundational moment. The importance of going back to foundational moments in history

serves to “at least strip from cause and function the obscuring shroud of dailiness, and see the appearance of mass culture as the result of particular human efforts to negotiate difficulties and seize opportunities” (*Selling Culture* 13). It is possible to strip this obscuring shroud through observing the structural changes in society that created those difficulties and opportunities, such as the historical, political, and economic conditions giving rise to something such as the megachurch movement. To do so is to get a better understanding of how and why societies develop mass culture: culture through which people reciprocally “create lives, relations, and institutions of a particular kind” (13). Thus, I will treat the megachurch movement as *embedded within, but also as its own individual, “mass culture,”* one that does precisely what Ohmann suggests that mass culture does: “include[s] voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists, for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so; with dependable frequency, mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit” (14). To do so, however, requires an initial, intricate look at church movement itself.

In 1970 there were only ten megachurches in existence; today there are 740 (Kroll 1). What is particularly compelling about these megachurches is 1) their increase corresponds with deindustrialization and post-Fordism; and 2) their growth comes from having to harness the energy of today’s market-created society on a large scale. The implications of these circumstances should not be overlooked. What once was considered a private act and practice—faith—is now a commodity being produced on a grandiose scale, in a much more public fashion. Faith is being manufactured in best-selling books, individually purchased church pews, and worshipper/consumer tailored sermons designed to ensure that everyone leaves church satisfied. Megachurches have learned how to commune an audience that the current body politic has not.⁵ Finally, in our identity-starved, globalized, hyper-mobile world, megachurches are finding ways to link individual subjectivities with “transcendent truths,” all the while claiming to build a democratic community. The new church is for the seekers and the non-believers, for the unchurched and the consumer-driven. It is this magic combination for which capitalism has been waiting. It is not enough to just make this claim, however. In the tradition of Ohmann’s portraits of societal phenomenon, I offer three snapshots of contemporary megachurches to set the stage for my analysis.

Megachurch #1: Willow Creek

Tucked away in the lush Chicago suburb of South Barrington, Illinois is one of the world’s largest churches: Willow Creek Community Church. It currently boasts over 18,000 members and upwards of 20,000 people in attendance for holiday services. These numbers are more than propaganda, Willow Creek’s consistent message to the public is that “We’re growing,” and that this

growth is evidence of God's blessing and grace. Looking like a university campus, the church complex resides on 155 acres of beautifully landscaped grounds: complete with a reflecting pool, a gymnasium, two bookstores, a food court, a parking lot bigger than that of the Brookfield Mall, shuttle buses, and off duty cops. It is no mistake that this church complex resembles a mall or amusement park, either. The church's mission is, simply put, to not look, act, or feel like a "regular" church. To that end, everything is designed for "the people": for those who might otherwise be turned off by old-time religion and who feel most comfortable in their local mall.

The vision for the church campus began thirty years ago when the current pastor, Bill Hybels, decided that he wanted to know why people were losing interest in traditionally liturgical religions such as Catholicism and strictly doctrinal Protestant strains such as Lutheranism. Like a traveling salesman, he went door to door for a year asking people in Illinois suburbs whether they went to church, and, if not, why. What Hybels found overwhelmingly is that it was men who did not like to go to church.⁶ Men did not like to attend church if it meant that they had to give up their possessions (e.g. tithing), nor did men want to sing, pray, confess, or admit vulnerability in front of their peers. Likewise, men did not want to give up their Sunday mornings to services that were primarily attended by women and children. Finally, men did not feel connected to churches in ways that women tended to, and men felt that there weren't as many opportunities for them to "bond" (Twitchell 3).

In response to this data, much like a marketing professional analyzing customer satisfaction surveys, Bill Hybels created a church that was, first, for the "unchurched," but second, for men: "sensitivity to male concerns is at the heart of Willow Creek's appeal. All churches provide redemption, but few can provide a lasting community of men" (Twitchell 2). Hybels concluded that, then as now, men need to feel connected to other men. Thus, Hybels began the church with a group concept called "Iron on Iron," (from the Proverbs 27 verse about iron sharpening iron) designed to give men a chance to come together in groups of 6-8 for weekly "male-oriented" sessions. While these groups have no official hierarchy or organizational structure, they often meet corporately by the thousands for seminars on subjects such as "How a Man Grows in Christ," and/or "Becoming the Tender Warrior." Hybels admits to realizing that the squad/small group concept is only effective if these large group meetings take place regularly because they provide a way for men to envision themselves as part of a battalion. This same concept drives men's movements such as "Promise Keepers," the military, or professional sporting event attendance: "as the owners of professional sports franchises have learned, if you can allow men to bond while maintaining the sense that everything is voluntary and unforced they will form a nucleus of furious energy" (Twitchell 2). It is this energy that makes the megachurch movement so intriguing. Incidentally, to this day, Hybels has a poster outside of his office that asks: "What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?" He has built

his church upon a growth model that appeals to the worshipper (a.k.a: seeker or consumer).

This same energy can be felt in the “communal appeal” of the (worship) “seeker services” and youth programming. The services are held in a 10,000 seat auditorium where the entire service is projected from two 16-28 foot LED screens. While Hybels still presents his sermon upfront, the screens project his image in larger-than-life format to every attendee, while also providing a way for him to include clips from video or internet to enhance his message technologically. Likewise, the large screens also provide a way for parents to know exactly where their kids are at all times. Throughout the service one can see messages such as: “the parents of child #348 need to come to the nursery as soon as possible.” This ready-made childcare, in addition to the promise of hearing surprise speakers such as Mel Gibson (the week before *The Passion* was released), Stephen Baldwin, and Randy Travis, makes every Sunday like a party. Adding to this community spirit are events that typically take place in private, such as baptisms, done on a large scale. As many as 750 people have been baptized together in Willow Creek’s reflecting pool. Finally, the church claims to remain a democratic, or non-hierarchical, entity. By remaining non-denominational, the church shields itself from the top-down management to which more traditional churches (i.e. Catholic or Baptist) are subject. This said, Willow Creek has, since its inception, spawned over 100 satellite churches around the country that follow Willow Creek’s “networking” doctrine and emulate its commitment to customer satisfaction. In short, Willow Creek has figured out how to reach the postmodern congregation, and more and more churches are following its lead.

Megachurch #2: Saddleback Valley Community Church

Saddleback Valley Community Church, with similar demographics to Willow Creek, reports 15,300 members from southern Orange County. Saddleback has an equally enviable technology program, along with a website and mailing list called Pastors.com that weekly, internationally reaches over 100,000 pastors. Much like Willow Creek, Saddleback Valley began with one man’s vision and indomitable will; Rick Warren wanted to bring “the message” to suburban Orange County. He felt led to grow a different kind of church, a church for those who would not regularly attend a traditional hymn-singing, fire-and-brimstone service. To be plain, he wanted to start a church that people actually wanted to attend. The church started with weekly meetings in Warren’s small condo, and has since grown to over 15,000 baptized members, a weekly 19,000 attendance average, and a first-time attendee roster of more than 70,000 people.⁷ Yet it can also boast of a few things that Willow Creek cannot. Rick Warren, the main pastor, works for free because when his book *Purpose Driven Life* was on the New York Times Bestseller List for over a year, he repaid to the church his entire salary from 1980 to the present. Warren’s success with

Purpose Driven Life has also resulted in NYSE and NASDAQ retailers such as Wal-Mart, Barnes and Noble, and Costco selling 5.8 millions copies of his book—making him a “better seller” than any other evangelist, including Billy Graham.⁸ Warren’s previous book *The Purpose Driven Church* has been translated into more than 20 languages and has been selected as one of the “100 Books that Changed the 20th Century.”⁹ One might even say he coined the “purpose driven” paradigm for churches, for his two books have prompted more than 250,000 pastors and church leaders to attend “Purpose Driven Church” seminars in over 18 countries in over 18 languages. The success of Warren’s organization has also led management gurus such as Peter Druker to consider Rick Warren the “inventor of perpetual revival.”¹⁰

An additional advantage for Warren and Saddleback Valley is the CMS marketing consulting firm. The Saddleback Church organization is just one of many clients such as Quaker, Isuzu Motors, Bumble Bee, and Perdue Farms who are promised that CMS will work with each client identifying opportunities and developing innovative, creative and profitable services which assist them in the execution of effective marketing, sales and communications programs (www.christian-ministry.com). Saddleback’s marketing company CMS offers the following services for its clients:

CMS uses sophisticated, proven-effective, proprietary software for tracking and fulfillment of all incoming POS and collateral materials requested, regardless of the source. Our Intelligent Response System ensures quick auditing of your customers’ requests. Based on the redemption criteria you set, we can isolate and process an extraordinary amount of useful information, such as checking for duplicates, correcting addresses, or assigning the industry segment data. (2)

Notwithstanding the sheer irony that CMS works with “redemption criteria” to isolate and process member data, it is clear that the marketing company is well-positioned to help its clients manage massive amounts of data. Where Bill Hybels may have had to go door to door 30 years ago to find out about church-going preferences, now Saddleback can access the same information with Intelligent Response Software. Not only can Rick Warren handcraft his church and message to his Orange County devotees, he can also keep up with continuing trends in parishioner demands and tailor his services and activities accordingly.

Megachurch #3: Lakewood Church

If Saddleback Valley’s pastor Rick Warren is the “inventor of perpetual revival,” then Lakewood Church’s pastor Joel Osteen is the poster-child for “Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at your Full Potential.” Currently there is no bigger facility and no more highly attended church in the United States than Joel Osteen’s

Houston-based Lakewood Church. The largest megachurch in American right now—the now Lakewood International Center—uses the same strategies as Willow Creek and Saddleback Valley, but with one additional component: television broadcasting.

The current pastor of the Lakewood International Center, Joel Osteen, dropped out of college in 1981 to become the manager for his father's television ministry. After taking over his father's pastorate in 1999, Osteen Jr. has worked continually to expand Lakewood's media strategies and air Lakewood Church television evangelism in over 140 countries. John Osteen, Joel's father, began Lakewood Church in 1959 in a small feed store in downtown Houston. Today, the *New York Times* has reported that the church grosses so much weekly revenue that the offering must be stored in a vault upon the premises. Keeping in line with the "growth" trajectory of the church, Osteen Jr. was not satisfied with the normal television evangelism time-slots of his father's ministry; therefore he has, since 1999, negotiated for the four top timeslots between 8 and 10am in the top 25 target markets. While this maneuver has cost him a \$6 million, his reward has been that between 8-10am on Sunday morning, Osteen can be seen preaching on 92 percent of the nation's televisions.¹¹

And what's not to want to watch? Joel Osteen and his wife Victoria are beautiful, well-polished suburbanites who live in a beautiful home, with well-adjusted children, and a Hummer parked outside. They are the perfect example of Osteen's message to America: that following Jesus will eventually pay off. Osteen's message, in other words, is a "health and wealth" gospel, one that he models all the way from his pulpit down to his designer suits. Perhaps this is why it didn't shock his reportedly 30,000 congregation that Lakewood would eventually pay 95 million dollars to move the ministry into the newly renovated Compaq Computer Center. As Osteen sees it, with most parishioners pledging 2,500 dollars a seat in the International Center, it won't take long until he is able to enter negotiations for a 59,000-seater in a few years ("Televangelist"). After all, he caters his sermons to his congregation. With four services a weekend—including one in Spanish—Osteen's message is nothing but upbeat and positive. Osteen avoids contentious issues like homosexuality and abortion from the pulpit, and he also stays away from asking for money. He wants his church to focus not on the suffering and poor, but on the healthy, wealthy potentiality of his congregation. Lest his emphasis on money and prosperity seem grossly extravagant and devoid of concern for less fortunate, Osteen's philosophy is that the best is yet to come. In other words, in typical upbeat fashion, Osteen feels Lakewood will be better able to minister to the poor when they have an even bigger congregation: "My philosophy is that \$95 million will be nothing compared to what we'll do when we have 100,000 people" (qtd. in Leland 2). Simply put, Osteen and his Lakewood International Center (and, I'd venture to say Willow Creek and Saddleback Valley, as well) will not be mobilized to work for the good of the rest of society until the entirety of the sub-

urban, God-fearing multitude is happily, successfully, and wealthily gathered every Sunday.

Lens 1: How We Got Here, or Historicity

And it is just this mobilization of the multitudes—undeniably taking place—that serves to create what I think Richard Ohmann would call a foundational movement and moment in American history and capitalism. For the genesis and manifestations of churches such as Willow Creek and Saddleback Valley is no longer an individual phenomenon.

So, how did we get here? How did we arrive at a place where a 30,000 member congregations spouting iterations of prosperity gospels are the preferred television shows on Sunday morning? As Ohmann shows us, mass culture and capitalism develop concurrently. What he also helps us see that is that in neoliberalism, democracy (the motor behind capitalism,) and Christianity derive from the same energy. While various socio-political theorists have tried to formulate revolutionary potential for this seemingly closed system, their theories break down in the face of structural formations such as the megachurch. Hardt and Negri, for example, have attempted to provide a way for us to reconceive of the democratic and productive potential of community (the multitude) within neoliberalism. According to Hardt and Negri, democratic possibility lies not in “the people” as a unitary concept, but instead in the “multiplicitous” or “many.” The multitude, they argue, is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a single entity; thus there is no “identity” of the multitude: “Insofar as the multitude is neither an identity (like the people) nor uniform (like the masses), the internal differences of the multitude must discover the common that allows them to communicate and act together. The common we share, in fact, is not so much discovered as it is produced” (xv).

This production, however, is precisely the condition that, Ohmann would argue, capitalism needs to reify as a particular type of mass culture. As Ohmann argues, “mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit” (*Selling Culture* 14). And this mass audience is created from the feeling of needing, recognizing, and having a product: such as the latest pastoral self-help book or membership in a trendy congregation. Americans learned this best, according to Ohmann, during the age of Barnum. People at the beginning of the 20th century learned to pay for amusement and came to expect that it would be produced by individuals. Moreover, people learned that publicity would be the forerunner and framer of the major event, that once at the event they should feel a certain way or have a certain experience, and that all of this would contribute to their feeling connected and adroit in the realm of the social (*Selling Culture* 19). In short, Ohmann argues, mass audiences formed through expectations of the new, the celebrated, the prosperous, and the magnanimous.

This explanation of the production of “class feeling” enables us to understand better why the mobilization strategy of American megachurches is still so successful. Mass culture, economics, and evangelicalism are inextricably linked. When evangelical Christianity first morphed into a powerful movement in the mid 19th century, the two biggest selling books at the time were Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and David Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. The idea that hard work and personal sacrifice beget individual wealth and freedom dovetails nicely with the evangelical gospel. If one can renounce one’s sin enough, and believe in the saving grace of a prosperous Heavenly father, then one should be able to rise above one’s own, self-created, impoverished conditions. As a result, during this time, poverty was seen as a spiritual problem and not a societal one. Due to state sanctions such as the 1830 Poor Law, poor citizens were banished to “poor houses” where they had to “work” off their transgressions: “these early faith-based initiatives regarded poverty as a divinely sanctioned payment play for a sinful life” (Bigelow 35). Likewise, poverty was not a problem for the general public to be concerned with, nor were the poor houses supposed to help sinners work toward a better secular life. The poorhouses were solely to save people’s souls.

By the end of the 19th century, while the general public was consumed with ideas of growth and progress, fundamentalist Christians began to fear that the Gospel was no longer culturally attractive. While Christianity has continued a certain isolationist existence following John’s exhortation that Christians should be in the world but not of the world,¹² a neo-evangelical movement that changed the face of evangelical Christianity emerges in the 1950s. Preachers such as Billy Graham began crusades to reach the general public en masse, to meet people where they were. The “outward-looking” movement of the time concentrated mostly on reaching people who would not normally attend a church service, yet it was so successful that in 1976 *Time* magazine declared it the “year of the evangelical” (Steinkamp 1). Since then, however, the focus of the evangelical movement has turned from saving the multitude to getting the multitude into individual church structures, or the “Church Growth Movement.” Even theologians argue that “postmodernism” changed the shape and face of what is possible for evangelicalism. Lutheran pastor Don Matzat writes:

The postmodern expression of Christianity is no longer historically based but is merely built upon the spiritual whims of the populace....By and large the Christian Church has not impacted the secular culture with the Gospel. Instead the philosophy, method and style of the secular culture have invaded the Christian Church....Many pastors are CEO’s. The worship services offer entertainment. We have Christian television, Christian radio, Christian books, and Christian gift shops. We search the Christian “yellow pages” to find Christian lawyers, psychologists, and financial

advisors. We cast our votes for the Christian politicians. Christian music is marketed in the same way as secular music. We can do Christian aerobics and join Christian weight-loss programs. A Christian ghetto has been produced. While Jesus told His church to be in the world but not of it, the culturally relevant evangelical is of it but not in it...While the classic liberal pastor questioned on the basis of or reason the truth of traditional Christian doctrine, the postmodern pastor ignores doctrine and focuses on methods which produce success. (qtd. in Steinkamp 2)

Matzat explains that today's Christianity is not based on historical tradition or dogma but instead on the desires of the worshippers. Moreover, the shape of theology has changed in order to keep up with the business models and marketing strategies of the 21st century. No longer is the message of megachurch evangelicalism geared toward working on one's salvation; it is geared toward marketing salvation to "work" for individual attendees. What Matzat describes here is the ability for the Christian right, through the *availability* of the pulpit, to produce a Christian "product" that is desirable to Christian consumers. One of the major tools for producing this desire, and consequent product, is the church. At a massive level, on a grand scale, this desire is being produced Sunday after Sunday in the safety of the suburbs.

Lens 2: Mass Culture and Mass Audience

One of the things that Ohmann reminds us about production is that it reifies culture. Moreover, commercializing a product to consumers—even on the grand scale of public entertainment (or church going)—inevitably culminates in modern forms of cultural production. Cultural production, however, needs an audience. Mass culture shapes habitual audiences around common needs or interests, for profit, and thus mass culture is reified.¹³ This has only become more prevalent in the age of flexible accumulation. For Hardt and Negri, one of the inevitable forces of globalization or "Empire" is the living entity of the "multitude." While Empire allows for the growth of hierarchy, corporate oligarchies, and colonization, it has an alternative face. Globalization also creates a network of "cooperation and collaboration" that stretches across nations and continents and allows for "an unlimited number of encounters" (xiii). It is here that Hardt and Negri see potential, for this network does not require that everyone become the same (class), instead it allows a commonality that facilitates our communication and collaborative action. In this way, the multitude is both mass audience and network.

The multitude is not, however, "the people" or "the masses"; for Hardt and Negri, these two groups of people are either singular identities or uniform conglomerates. The multitude, instead, is neither an identity nor is it uniform; it is whole of symbiotic singularities, united in the "desire for democracy" (xvi). What links the var-

ious members of the multitude, however, is its capacity to “produce” desire, or “the common.” The concept of the common is not a byproduct of the community but a “productive activity of the singularities of the multitude” (206). In theory, the idea of the common breaks the modern idea of sovereignty and calls for realignment of all biopower,¹⁴ such that all that is public must become reappropriated and managed by the common. In this way, social life is organized by the common. It is this idea of production, however, that allows for slippage of what can and will constitute a multitude.

It is in this conception of the potential of the multitude to “produce” a common space—where Ohmann becomes especially relevant and theorists such as Hardt and Negri become problematic. Hardt and Negri claim that the multitude can exist without an “identity” (e.g. “the people”), as well as without uniformity (e.g. “the masses”). While it is true that there must be a mobilizing factor to unite those disadvantaged (whom Hardt and Negri call “the poors”) by capitalism in all parts of the world, it is also true that that same consensus-building can be co-opted by free-market capital lovers. How else can we explain the proliferation of the privatization of traditionally “social” or public services? The national quiet at Bush’s recent bypassing of Congress to elect a UN ambassador? The overwhelming popular opinion favoring Bush’s anti-choice/anti-environment practices? In fact, if one considers the American megachurch, Hardt and Negri’s conception of the multitude may make them some of the worst offenders in neoliberalism: those who argue for an alternative that actually creates consumer subjects. In other words, Hardt and Negri argue for a “resistant” movement that has already been proven effective by the very social orders they are fighting against.

Hardt and Negri argue that we must utilize the network system—or swarm intelligence—of late capitalism/globalization in order to bring about global democracy. Democracy, as described by them, is fueled by the tremendous optimism that all of humankind will eventually require/desire liberation: “The common currency that runs throughout so many struggles and movements for liberation across the world today—at local, regional, and global levels—is the desire for democracy” (xvi). A compelling argument can be made, however, that this same optimism is also what fuels capitalism and evangelicalism (and often through one another). Consensus is derived from the belief that the best is yet to come, or that society has not yet reached its preferred and ultimate state of existence. In capitalism, the rational organization of labor will lead to material accumulation. In democracy, material accumulation (i.e. property rights) will allow for (or, at least hypothetically, will not impede) equal representation. And, finally, in Christianity, equal representation is only possible through the mediation of Jesus Christ, and will only be actualized upon Christ’s return or the Christian subject’s death and subsequent ascent to heaven. It isn’t difficult to see how these three moral orders dovetail nicely. According to Max Weber, the asceticism and piety required by

post-Reformation Christianity provided ample breeding grounds for the capitalistic spirit. The center of this Protestant doctrine was the concept of “original sin” and of the need to work toward individual redemption through a combination of faith and good works. Working in close connection with the idea of individual salvation was also that of “the call,” the belief that if one could accept, through faith, that one had been called by God to be a part of his kingdom, then all other aspects of the individual’s life would be blessed. Thus, the tests of hard labor, poverty, and economic shrewdness were/are merely extensions of one’s personal virtue and Godly blessing:

Evangelicals interpreted the mental anguish of poverty and debt, the physical agony of hunger or cold, as natural spurs to prick the conscience of sinners. They believed that the suffering of the poor would provoke remorse, reflection, and ultimately the conversion that would change their fate. In other words, poor people were poor for a reason, and helping them out of poverty would endanger their mortal souls. It was the evangelicals who began to see the business mogul as a heroic figure, his wealth a triumph of spirit. (Bigelow 35)

Here it is clear that the individualistic spirit, linked to the idea of production through work, would lead to both eternal and monetary blessing. Thus evangelicalism and capitalism have always linked forces well; both require conversion from a state of depravity to a state of abundance (either in Christ or in the pocket). In these models, then, we can see that what mobilizes people is a generative doubt of one’s current state. John and Jean Comaroff argue something similar about religion in *Public Culture: Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. They argue that the disruptions, displacements, and inequities caused by neoliberalism are “widely experienced throughout the world” at a “frightening rate at present” and thus religious schemes and movements are sprouting up to fill the void (316). Drawing from Marx and Weber, the Comaroffs argue that most people (save the obscenely rich) are seeing arcane forces relegate their labor—and the production of value—to the new masters: the masters of the market. Erasure and loss accompany this alienation particularly acutely in the neoliberal moment, as destabilized labor, translocation of management, and the commodification of bodies/persons/cultures/histories, continually substitute “quantity for quality, abstraction for substance” (316). In short, the creative destruction of late capitalism has left a vacuous space between those who control the market and those who are subject to its effects. Subsequently, religion has become more prominent as a stabilizing system of value. As the Comaroffs suggest, the ethical dimensions of religious (occult or otherwise) economies are increasingly prominent, and the mass panic of our times tends to be moral in tone. Moreover, these panics often

express themselves in religious movements that pursue instant material returns and yet condemn those who enrich themselves in nontraditional ways. In keeping with neoliberalism, it appears that the draw of such religious movements is to create wealth from nothing (“the poor shall inherit the earth”), for, as the Comaroffs point out, the line between Ponzi/pyramid schemes and evangelical prosperity gospels is very thin (313).

In particular, protestant evangelicalism has enthusiastically embraced the idea of prosperity in the material world. While the Comaroffs mention the Universal Church in Brazil, all one need do is step foot in the mega-churches here in the United States to find evidence of “inner-worldly asceticism” having been replaced with “a concern for the pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire” (315). In other words, these churches have become naturalized behemoths of land, capital, and power. The churches have a mission to the “unchurched,” and, instead of trying to provide these seekers with respite from the material world, these churches use consumer culture to increase attendance and participation. A rhetorical analysis of the term “seeker” within postmodernism would suggest that just as postmodern subjects try to orient themselves geographically (as David Harvey observes), postmodern “seekers” also try to align themselves ontologically and theologically. It might actually be fair to call the megachurch “Church-lite,” for, as the Comaroffs note about the Universal Church, megachurches seem to operate under the idea that “the Second Coming evokes not a Jesus who saves, but one who pays dividends. Or, more accurately, one who promises a miraculous return on a limited spiritual investment” (315).

That religion has attempted to fill the void that the alienation of labor creates is nothing new. Likewise, that churches have attempted to cater to the needs of their members is old hat in America. What is worth noting, however, are the ways that neoliberal capital is producing a particular type of Christianity that emphasizes a privatized, personalized type of rebirth within a super-size culture. When the increasingly obscured alienation of labor renders class consciousness impotent, then people must find other ways to “identify” with one another. Class becomes just another choice or lifestyle, as the “right to worship” becomes yet another way to privatize the public.

Lens 3: The Professional Managerial Class

It is important to understand who comprises the particular consumer-seeker culture and how this particular class originated. Ohmann argues, with John and Barbara Ehrenreich, that a particular class of people came into being at the end of the 19th century. The significance of this class is that demographically it is they who have stayed in the suburbs and who constitute the majority of today’s megachurch phenomenon. The PMC is what populates today’s American megachurches. They are the young, professional, immaterially laboring, middle-class, those who are more comfort-

able in a big box store than anywhere else. To provide a quick overview: Ohmann explains that the PMC originated as a group of people who had more than simple labor power, and enough income and authority, to distinguish themselves from the industrial proletariat. This was not an expanded petty bourgeoisie, however; it was a class of people who were neither big capitalists nor small entrepreneurs, but instead who were in charge of the reproduction of capitalist class relations (*Politics of Knowledge* 90). The PMC consisted (and still consists!) of people who do the mental work of furthering capitalist production, but who do not have a material or trade. In other words, the PMC services the goals and functions of capitalism, facilitating preservation of “the contours and power relations of capitalist society” (90) through occupations in medicine, law, consulting, teaching, advertising, and so on. These individuals “grew” modern society, crafted scientific advances, perfected the modern university, and thought, through their mental work, that they were inventing a more just society. Yet, as Ohmann points out, it was precisely this class that consolidated the production of knowledge and in doing so “established the key site of PMC advancement and self-reproduction” (91). In many ways, the PMC created its own cultural capital.

The PMC likewise sought to distinguish itself through geographical placement. As Ohmann notes, while the PMC necessarily had a status to create and protect, it also could not exist in the urban world with its “clear social ranks and face-to-face relations” (*Selling Culture* 122). Thus, the PMC negotiated, appropriated, and gave meaning to space outside of the city and the suburb was born. The PMC, by virtue of its economic makeup, had more options than many laborers working in the city and the bigger homes and lots they could purchase were outside of the city limits. At the same time, while the city centers gave the PMC access to “culture,” its members could not afford the high prices of homes in the genteel quarters of the city. Migrating outward of the city thus allowed for the PMC to live larger and more noticeably, while still being surrounded by those most like them. The suburb became both a status and a shield from the increasing class-stratified city. It is in this way that another class was created, Ohmann suggests, because space is both “a social product and a powerful determinant of social processes” (*Selling* 123). While it took several decades for this new space to be construed as “suburb,” its significance remains all the same. A place had been carved for those wanting the solace of the same class. And today it remains the same, only now this same class is attending large churches at an astonishing rate.

Lens 4: The Importance of Place

Ohmann shows us that space becomes a critical product in late capitalism; particularly for the PMC, a structure of class feeling was both created with and flowed from the spatial organization of suburbanization (*Selling* 135). This resulted from a feeling of retreating from the city’s overcrowding and undesirable neighbors, but also from the feeling that the country offered both privacy and

community. The suburb offered a pastoral reprieve from the chaos of city interactions. This is not unlike the suburban sprawl still seen today. While many efforts have been made in postmodernism to redevelop the nostalgia of old city dwellings and mixed-income communities, geographical placement still carries with it huge symbolic meaning. In this way, Ohmann's words help give shape to David Harvey's claims that place-identity is endemic to post-modernity.

According to David Harvey, strategic geographical placement in postmodernism is a direct response to Marx's prophesied "annihilation of space by time." Harvey deems late capitalism as the time-space compression of "flexible accumulation" (282). Unlike during Fordism when production was organized vertically, today labor processes are diffused around the world with varying degrees of rapidity and intensity. Due to the rapid deployment of new organizational forms and new technologies in production, labor processes have reached a momentum unknown to capitalism before the 1970s—a momentum that requires constant deskilling and reskilling of its labor force. This acceleration in labor processes has prompted a parallel acceleration in "exchange and consumption," one enabled by "improved systems of communication and information flow, coupled with rationalizations in techniques of distribution" (283). In other words, capitalism has reached an unprecedented pace of accumulation and production, and, resultantly, consumers have kept up an equally rapid pace of consumption. This system of accumulation is characterized by rapid geographical mobility, deindustrialization, and international division of labor, self-governing global financial systems, and advanced telecommunications systems: in other words, "mega" everything.

Harvey goes on to suggest that the consequence of this rapidity and expansion is a particular mode of "thinking, feeling, and doing" that is typical to postmodernity. Specifically, we have become plagued with valuing instantaneity. According to Harvey, we have become a "throw away" society so that we may keep pace with rapidly produced material goods. New goods and services are produced daily, and our desires change in order to keep up with these goods and services. And, all the while supply and demand increases, capital looks for newer, faster ways to co-opt our consumption. What is most grievous about this scenario, Harvey seems to suggest, is that we have extended this mindset to "values, lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places" and people" (286). In short, we have become dislocated, disjoined, and placeless. Echoing Alvin Toffler, Harvey suggests that subjects in postmodernity have experienced a profound change in our human psychologies, and that this has provided for the "crack-up of consensus." It isn't hard to extrapolate from this idea possible reasons for the current political apathy prevalent in America today, nor for the seeming identical natures of our two political parties and resultant undemocratic nature of our body politic. Our public and personal value systems are no longer stable and are fraught with a volatility that impedes long-term planning and political action.

Enter the megachurch phenomenon. In a diseased system, when one moral order fails (i.e. democracy) there are two equally strong orders to which to turn: capitalism and Christianity. Further, Harvey suggests, capitalism is always/already pandering to our “temporari-ness”-disease by being “predominantly concerned with the production of signs, images, and sign systems” (287). No longer does capitalism merely produce goods; it also produces the images that make us desire commodities, services, spaces, and information all the more. These images can now be mass-marketed over space in relatively little time, thus “ephemerality and instantaneous communicability over space then become virtues to be explored and appropriated by capitalists for their own purposes” (288). In essence, capitalism has learned to cope with our progressive speed of life and has thus produced new experiences of space and time that allow us to feel as though we are handling the speed of our lives remarkably well.

But the reality, Harvey suggests, is that we aren’t handling it so well after all. Particularly with respect to space, we have become increasingly confused about what space/place even means. As cities become more decentralized, and as spatial boundaries become more collapsible, we have developed certain pathologies regarding space. For one, we have become incessantly nostalgic for a more whole, coherent past. Due to our capability to produce and reproduce images, we have created simulacra of our pasts through built environments: “With modern building materials it is possible to replicate ancient buildings with such exactitude that authenticity or origins can be put into doubt” (289). Here Harvey suggests that our images/material simulacra have become indistinguishable from their originals. Further, he hints, we are satiated with this—something which Harvey finds quite problematic. Another pathology that has developed as a result of the time-space compression is that capital pays much closer attention to relative locational advantages, “precisely because diminishing spatial barriers give capitalists the power to exploit minute spatial differentiations to good effect.” This is precisely the reason why there are very few megachurches in urban areas. Generally, megachurches sprout in suburbs of 200,000 or more, and provide a stable, inoculated space for the professional managerial class to commune. The result is that superior command over space becomes an even more “important weapon in class struggle” (290). All three megachurches mentioned earlier: Willow Creek, Saddleback Valley, and Lakewood International Center, can be found in high-income suburbs on the outskirts of major cities. And in these suburbs, as with everywhere else, spaces become places that capital can appropriate. In other words, place becomes just another tool for “growth,” even church growth.

According to Harvey, in postmodernity everything is subsumed by this drive for competition and growth within capital. As a result, we have attempted to squander meaning in places where we can, such as in museums, cultural heritage, and nationalism. Harvey suggests that our defense mechanism for dealing with the disori-

enting drive of capital has become to search for personal and collective identity in shifting forms. This third pathology is that we have become obsessed, knowingly or unknowingly, with developing *place identity*. Precisely because we don't 'know our places' anymore, we are trying even harder to fight for places (geographically and metaphorically) that we can salvage and manufacture. In other words, we are fighting to retain identity—that cannot be easily retained through traditional capital—through associating ourselves with places or movements.

Lens 5: Landing Theoretically Toward the Future

The fight to find and retain an identity is still motoring capitalism, democracy and Christianity today. For example, the rhetoric of "terrorism" crises makes us doubt that democracy is secure; thus we (at least according to those hopeful George W. Bush mercenaries) will fight to keep democracy all the more alive. Likewise, late capitalism has interpellated "disposable" subjects who are now accustomed to believing that the next innovation is right around the corner, so we keep producing and consuming in hopes of purchasing stability. Following a similar rhetoric of doubt, a compelling denominator of American megachurches today is that the "old" church is not reaching enough people today and is not meeting their needs; thus thousands of people come together with the intent of reaching even more "seekers." Ohmann notes that a similar phenomenon took place at the beginning of the 20th century when people became used to, and thus built community out of the desire for, the innovative and the new. Today, at the turn of the 21st century the desires are similar. People are still trying to find stability in the newness of each coming product, job, or sermon. "Networks" are forming not necessarily for political action but through groups of divergent people are finding solace from today's transient and fleeting temporal connections.

When Hardt and Negri describe today's isomorphic, or networked society, they explain that the network, or circuitry, has become the dominant model defining our ways of understanding and acting in the world (142). These networks are formed by the organization of cooperative and communicative relationships and are dictated by the immaterial (no longer material) design of production. This model should not be unexpected, they argue, for implicit even in Marxism is the idea that social systems will remain generative as long as capitalism can sustain its own profligation. Particularly important to our contemporary networked society, however, is the dependence on immaterial labor, or the production of ideas, images, knowledges, communications, cooperation, social life and affective relations. It is these entities that are motoring our current globalized society. To the point: the energy of this system, Hardt and Negri argue, is founded in "the common."

Inherent in this idea of the common, however, is also the "solution" to globalized capital and the growing gap between the wealthy and poor. As biopolitical power is founded in the com-

mon, it also provides a means to use new images and ideas as a means for collaboration. The common, they contend, can serve as a place to link people transnationally and transculturally. Yet, it is hard to argue against the fact that the common hasn't already been predetermined for us. Even if we are savvy enough to get outside of "the common," ideas of "the common" can be (and are!) used for equally liberatory or deleterious ends. Here it is worth noting that I do not want to argue explicitly that American megachurches are toxic—I think that they are a fascinating exemplar of the power of mass group movements in the US—but I do contend that they represent a kind of multitude that Hardt and Negri do *not* account for. And, I think that if we are to understand the reason why George Bush is still in office today (or why our current political and economic situation is so dissolute) we must come to terms with movements such as these. It should not surprise us that the pastor¹⁵ of the New Life Church (over 10,000 members) in Colorado Springs, CO, got a call from George W. asking him to be present at the signing of the partial-birth abortion ban. Nor should it surprise us that one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington D.C. is the "Family Research Council" which is dedicated to promoting "the Judeo-Christian worldview as the basis for a just, free, and stable society" (Hedges 56). What this requires, though, is not an esoteric conceptualization of the power of the multitude, such as Hardt and Negri's, but instead a material analysis of multitudes (driven by and through democracy, capitalism, and religion), and their effects. For example, the person who began the Family Research Council is the same man who began the "Focus on the Family" ministry; he works out of an 80 acre campus in Colorado Springs that has its own zip code, employs 1,300 people, sends out 4 million pieces of mail every month, and can be heard on radio stations in ninety-nine countries around the world (Hedges 60).

My quandary, then, given the power that other "multitudes" are also gathering, is that Hardt and Negri eventually provide no alternative model. And, if one contends that they do, all one must do is look at institutions such as Willow Creek or the Family Research Council to be given pause. The "network" model they propose as problem AND panacea is exactly the same model¹⁶ used by these megachurches in order to reach disparate audiences of up to 20,000 people. In these churches, rhetoric of "democratic community" or "fellowship" has usurped talk of the individual, in much the same way that globalized markets now claim to create a global village and provide a democratic means of information/goods/services transfer (while all the while being engineered by a few players while still fostering individualism par excellence). In other words, the guise of democracy, because of late capitalistic networks, becomes—in the example of American megachurches—yet another tool for capitalism. Much like Lenin argued that the bourgeoisie and the opportunists within the working-class movement had "elaborated" Marxism beyond revolutionary recognition at the beginning of the 20th century, so, too, might Hardt and Negri "push to the foreground and extol what is or seems acceptable to

the bourgeoisie" (Lenin 7). Megachurches, when analyzed with this same critical lens, then, demonstrate that any moral order (including Marxism) can be easily be co-opted by capitalism. The "multitude," even if it is theorized to be for everyone, will inevitably be overtaken. We are then left with two distinct "classes" (still!): those who have a voice to argue on behalf of the poors (which is liberalism) and the poors themselves. Hardt and Negri's synthesis is that the multitude will not derive from any political model of the past, but will come from true "political action" from that which severs the nexus between violence and law, and that which provides a new science of democracy. As my paper suggests, however, this new science is already tied to the moral order of two other power forces: capitalism and Christianity. For, what is a 20,000 peopled megachurch congregation if not an energy driven, communicative force, bringing together a multiplicity of singularities? It is this question we must continually attempt to answer as we travel further into neoliberalism. If we do not, we are choosing to remain blind to one of the most powerful systems driving the body politic today.

The question then becomes, what do we do next? Do we sit back quietly and let megachurches flourish, or do we find ways to demystify what is going on in the private sphere by bringing it into the public? Should we care that 18,000 people continue to gather each Sunday in South Barrington, Illinois—smack in the middle of a geographical paradise—to participate in a Christianity that "feels good" to them and doesn't make them drive by homeless people on the way or think about the poors? Hardt and Negri's answer is to look to utopian abstractions. They see the potential of the multitude as manifest in groups such as the Internet Zapatistas or the WTO protesters. For Hardt and Negri these groups signify the potential of multiplicitous singularities finding a common to work toward together. With these models we are left with one gaping hole, however. Harnessing the power of those who already have access to technology or the means to be heard at an international summit leaves us with nothing more than liberalism: those who have fighting on behalf of those who do not.

Even with the best intentions of seeing places and boundless, identities as unfixed, and globalization's networks as potential-laden, people who deny historical materialism "become complicitous as historical agents with the reproduction of the particular set of permanences that capitalism has tightly fashioned out of otherwise open, fluid, and dynamic social processes" (Harvey *Justice* 108). Ohmann's method shows us that turning away from all projects that seem too universal—in the name of being multiplicitous or localized—does not ensure real power over the trajectory of social change within space. The breadth of Richard Ohmann's scholarship helps us see the danger in utopian abstractions that cannot be acted out upon the ground. According to him, our task is not only to understand the world and locate its problems, but to find the most effective ways to change it. As such, exploration and historical wisdom remain an important force in the struggle. We

cannot do this, he and I both argue, by consenting to the destructive logic of capital, or by finding ways to argue for a multitude that actually serves the goals of capitalism.

Notes

¹Previous door sign adorning office of [megachurch] Willow Creek's pastor, Bill Hybels. Original slogan coined by Peter Drucker: management guru; author of over 30 books, including *The Executive in Action: Managing for Results, Innovation and Entrepreneurship* and *The Principles of Management*; and recipient of George W. Bush's "Presidential Medal of Freedom" in 2002.

² Kirbyjon Caldwell—Former Wharton Business School trained Investment Banker, current pastor of megachurch Windsor Village United Methodist and spiritual advisor to President George W. Bush

³ See Kroll "Megachurches, Megabusiness," 3.

⁴ See Harkin "Dick Ohmann: An Appreciation," 1.

⁵ It should make us wonder how churches weekly convene tens of thousands of worshippers in cities all over America, when we cannot get more than 13 percent of America to go out and vote every four years.

⁶ See Twitchell.

⁷ *USA Today*, July 21, 2003.

⁸ See Vaughn.

⁹ See Pastors.com.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Kroll pg. 3.

¹² John 17, *NIV*.

¹³ *Selling Culture*, 14.

¹⁴ Hardt and Negri use the notion of biopower (from Foucault) as those forms of social control that regulate or enable life and reproduction.

¹⁵ This is the same pastor who was quoted as saying that the tsunami was providential for it hit "the number one exporter of radical Islam"—Indonesia. This he considers not a judgment, but an "opportunity" for Christians. This is also the same pastor who makes Thomas Freidman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* required reading for anyone who works/volunteers on his staff.

¹⁶ See facts about Willow Creek/Lakewood Church.

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