

Is Nothing Sacred? Privatization and the Person.

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Abstract

This essay develops a hypothesis concerning both privatization itself and its relation to modernity. Privatization-in-general (as opposed to the 1980s manifestations we still *call* privatization) had its genesis in the sixteenth century Reformation and counter-Reformation. From this theological space, it unfolded *in a distinctively moral way* through a variety of theatres, and as it did so, it found in each of these a new articulation. Arising in what was then becoming “the West,” it had a determined character, in that in an anthropological sense it was closely linked to the Judaeo-Christian notion of the sacredness of the person. As a result, as privatization carved – and carves – its ongoing paths through these theatres – philosophical, economic, legal, educational, aesthetic, political – it threatens existing orders, even as it holds out the promise of ever-new versions of the private (and its opposites, the public, the social, and so on). The authors contend that this view of privatization proffers a new way of grasping and defining modernity itself (although it is beyond the purview of the essay to do more than indicate the shape of such definition). The account offered limits itself to showing the moral nature and genesis of privatization, and explores examples of its emergence in selected fields. It does so in a spirit of hypothesis and illustration, rather than of demonstration or exhaustiveness.

Privatization-in-General

This essay offers a revision of privatization, situates it anew, and suggests a certain re-valuation of its values. Once, not so very long ago, what was called “privatization” was seen as a shocking thing, something that many considered as cheapening the things most “sacred” in our emphatically secular society. Now, though, the immediacy of that threat (or promise) has receded, supplanted by dismay at the excesses of what is widely diagnosed to be corporate greed. In taking stock of privatization, we seek to make sense not just of late twentieth century public asset sales, but of a wider privatizing *logic*. Strangely enough, the advent of the global financial crisis allows us to do this, as the collapse in equity prices from 2006-2009 has done rather more than make it seem pointless – it has brought a little more of the wider logic into public view – and made our own analytic task a little easier.

Privatization, we have long been told, is the process of selling public assets to the private sector – and so it is. More precisely, there is a limited historical truth in the narrow Thatcherite formulation, and the process of transferring public assets to the private sector must at least be included in the wider account we ourselves intend to give of the matter. But before this idea ever existed in the minds of economists and protestors, there had already been many waves of other kinds of privatization – some unremarked, others sites of great anguish. In drawing these varieties

together, we can see that privatization is one of the long-standing engines of modernity itself; it drives much change that can be called “modern” and affects all areas of “modern society.”ⁱ

Where the kind of privatization that leads to electricity companies or airlines being sold by government agencies to private bidders is a narrow form of it, we are principally interested in a deeper and more general logic. Privatization, for us, is a *qualified general* process with many specific, local, and particular dimensions. It is qualified because it has not existed since time immemorial; rather, it emerges as a definable and yet only partially visible – moral and epistemic – logic from the sixteenth century. Some sociologists call it “privatism,” and some such dictionaries enjoin us not to confuse the words (Marshall 1994: 417-18). The nuance is understandable, as it distinguishes a narrow economic derivation from a wider social process. But the nuance is not just pedantic; it is wrong, for (at risk of repetition) privatization-the-economic-policy is a derivative of privatization-in-general. To rename it is actually to neglect one of its important variants. Other sociologists who do use the term say that it refers to the way “people live their lives less in public and more in private or with the family. For example, religion is said to be now less a matter of public acts of worship and more a question of private prayer or privately held beliefs” (Abercrombie *et al.* 1988: 195). We believe it essential that this shift is included in the purview of the term as it is part and parcel of the wider process we will hereafter call privatization-in-general. Tracing privatization-in-general entails interpreting it in terms of the sacred, an anthropological structure that manifests itself in the cultural and moral order of the society.ⁱⁱ

The vistas we survey and some of the claims we make may seem sweeping – our essay, though, has the quality of hypothesis, and of an effort to render existing long-standing conceptions of key terms – privatization, modernity, society, individualism, and the public – consistent with one another. In particular, we are concerned to speculate on an alignment between different orders of privatization on the one hand, and of modernity on the other. This involves thinking about the genesis of both – and this is sometimes as much a matter of clarifying the object of discourse, as it is of making some new historical discovery. The need is self-evident – as there really is a lack of clarity concerning the objects of discussion. The case of “modernity” is starkest of all. For many, perhaps most, historians, modernity is self-evidently associated with capitalism and the industrial revolutions in the eighteenth century. Others would see it as arising even later, when distinctive political states take shape and “modern” political movements arise. Without denying the importance of the events that took place at these times, we propose an earlier date.ⁱⁱⁱ We do so knowing that the date we propose only holds for certain purposes, and that at least part of the value of any inquiry like this one lies in the alignments it establishes.

A further difficulty concerns articulating the essential character *and the connections* between the general forms of modernity and of privatization. This is so because the natures of both modernity and privatization are often elusive, appearing as things other than themselves. To use Charles Taylor's apt term, their "sources" are difficult to see. Modernity seems to be a matter of polity and of technology, but is not only that. Privatisation, similarly, appears to concern either a limited sociological issue (the rise of a notion of private as opposed to public life) or a business practice (privatisation in the narrow sense), but it is something far wider. Yet while such dimensions are almost always partially hidden, we can nonetheless point to their presence. This is because, usually by negation, privatization reveals ever-new versions of the sacred, both in the new possibilities for personhood that it throws up, and in the way it casts aside redundant forms. In so doing, it reveals the sacred itself in a new light, one not to be found in cathedrals or supposedly holy books. Instead, it lies in the deep value Western societies in the Judaeo-Christian tradition attach to personhood and to freedom.

In this respect, the sacred lives on in secular society, and has the same terrifying potential it always had. As Casáreo Bandera's perceptive book, the *Sacred Game* notes in passing, secular visions of the world operate in farcical naivety of the reasons for their fictions, and they "march confidently in one direction while thinking they are going in exactly the opposite one" (32). The modern sacred, indeed, reveals itself in the searing waves of privatization-in-general, as over and over again the curved and bloodied knife of individuation carves and re-carves the very fabric of the theatres of the world – economic, political, legal – and does so in the name of our freedom, and thereby, our personhood.

Sacred Shock: the Site of the Person

Our enabling hypothesis is simple enough – the basis of all privatization lies in challenges to the sanctity – or sacrality – of the person. When the narrow policy of privatization broke on the world stage in the 1980s, in the form of Thatcherism (Britain), Reagonomics (the US) and Rogernomics (New Zealand), many were inclined to pose the keynote question that signifies the relationship of privatization in general to the person: *is nothing sacred?* Would they one day sell their grandmothers along with the family silver? This, a response structure, is already an indication of the moral dimension of privatization in the narrow sense; many forget, however, that privatization's strongest political advocates also had "moral" agenda – something manifested in the shockwave it created. The shock of privatization was the shock to human dignity affronted by the "sale of the public" to the "private." Equally, for its proponents, it held out a moral *promise*.

Calling “privatization” moral entails rethinking what kind of “thing” it is – and seeing this “thing” at work in the already-accepted forms of the term. An Australian writer commenting on Thatcherism in 1980s Britain remarked that privatization “entailed curtailing of spending on welfare to promote a return to family-based responsibility, and encouragement of popular capitalism through maximizing share ownership in the community as well as ownership of land and housing” (Wiltshire, 1987: ix). Sketching this context, Wiltshire goes on to remark that this was a government that had links with the then “New Right” position in the United States, especially with its “strong stance on moral issues and on a hankering for the free interplay of market forces and the issues of economics—laissez faire” (1987: 5). We find the same nexus in other, more pragmatically-oriented economics accounts too:

The rise of Thatcherism and Reaganomics succeeded in advocating the virtues of private enterprise, private initiative and private motive. It emphasized rolling back the frontiers of the state in order to promote an efficient and free society. The ethics of privatization is based on the validity of private as opposed to state property rights; as such, the emphasis on privatization did not occur in an intellectual vacuum. (Gupta, 2000: 22)

In both accounts, an “ideological” variant or basis is identified, but this only quarantines us from seeing that privatization of this kind is also primarily (and before it is *anything* else), a *moral activity*. Such then is our enabling hypothesis: in order to delineate *what kind of thing* privatization of the Thatcher variety is, we contend that it is primarily a moral process concerning the sacred nature of the person. For us, therefore, Thatcherite privatization is at least as much akin to activities associated with the Reformation as it ever has been to “the government” – let alone imagined “privatization” policies like we find on taxation or the environment. Its bases are not efficiency, except insofar as that is a *moral* virtue; the return to “family-based responsibility” cited above provides a moral, not merely political, basis.

The Moral and the Sacred

If privatization has an insistent moral aspect, we need now to pause to emphasize what this means: put bluntly, the moral always touches upon the sacred – even in those societies that imagine themselves to be entirely secular^{iv} in nature. Indeed, in the sphere of human aggregation that characterizes modernity, we can place less trust in words like “social” or “society” or even “public” as strongly as we can upon the logic of privatization itself. In short, privatization of the Thatcherite kind was just another wave of privatization-in-general. Later, when we consider the work of Richard Sennett, we return to the significance of the reference to the family. But already, we see in this moral discourse, a “*social*” location. The location is the jagged and always constitutive split between

private and public (the division itself constitutes the two domains). As Mark Kingwell puts it in his *A Civil Tongue*:

No public/private distinction is a neutral property, nor are its limits fixed or permanent, nor again is control of its placement a trivial issue. Yet such a distinction does exist, and we make this clear every single day of our social lives: the gap between person and citizen is the gap between the perfection of the moral vision each of us (or each group of us) is committed to pursuing, and the limitations and compromise that result from sharing social space with others of divergent commitment. (1995: 47)

If we do not endorse Kingwell's contention that difference is *the* engine that explains all this (for there are symmetries that are just as generative), there is real value in his attempt to define the distinction between a person and a citizen. In his hands, the former has private and the latter social bases; but, as he also recognizes in the above lines, these two are historically contingent, and the line between public and private roles can and does change.

In relation to the case of privatization in the narrow sense of economic policy, what is most telling about its moral basis is its *affective structure*. Privatization in this sense was experienced by many people in Thatcher's Britain as a deeply shocking, even traumatic, structure. But this is ambivalent, as we must expect with moral formations. Others who went through this time did not so much endure as profit by it. Moreover, they found the experience bracing and exciting, as it afforded new and hitherto unthought vistas and possibilities. Like all waves of privatization, then, narrow privatization affected the person *personally*. The unsettling affect, the sense on the one hand of limitless promise, and on the other, of old world views fading, or being contemptuously cast aside – all these things are features of true privatization.

How, though, can the *sacred* dimension we see so far only in its dimension of negation, be grounded? We contend that privatization is not just a matter of economic (eg. Thatcherite) subjects, but of *persons*, and we contend that this conception of the person as sacred did – and must have – pre-existed the rise of the modernity on which we can now retrospectively say that same modernity was founded. The Judaeo-Christian nature and vintage of personhood is explored by Linda Zagzebski in her history of that structure. She cites Kant's differentiation in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* between things that have dignity and things that have price: a thing that has a price is exchangeable; something which has no equivalent has a dignity (2001: 402). The Kantian schema continues to have relevance, but in a problematic way. Zagzebski suggests that without something like the Christian basis it emerged from to ground it, schemas like Kant's are swept away by the advancing regime of price. In our view, of course, she is correct. Privatization is framed by a moral discourse, and our hypothesis is that this is most certainly *not* something that starts with Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan.

Genesis

We now begin a three-part sketch of historical dimensions of the early unfolding of privatization-in-general. In this first section, we deal with the founding sacred aspect, the “moral” genesis of privatization. In the next, we deal with its articulation, what we have called its “philosophical” genesis. Then we turn (briefly) to the inauguration of legal/economic conceptions of the private. Only then will our contentions be robust enough to articulate the “social” dimension, and the issues of individual crisis (anomie) that afflict us today.

By the time of the English civil wars, privatization was in its true and most general sense, already well under way. We need to begin a little earlier than this, to see its departure points in theological contestation. Let us begin by establishing a few limits, if only to clarify what it is that we are suggesting. Obviously, Jesus Christ’s imperative to “render unto Caesar” could be said to inaugurate – or at least express – a certain kind of privatization of religion; and Epictetus’s stoic philosophy of *ataraxia*, predicated as it is on a personal detachment from what lies outside the individual’s control, relies on an interior will. Our choice of the Reformation as a point of focus here is partly pragmatic, partly analytically derived. Surely, all the abovementioned lines of inquiry *are* relevant to a full consideration of privatization, one whose brief is broader than what we’ve delimited here. Here we restrict ourselves to examining the logics of privatization and their genesis – their institutional and theoretical corollaries in modernity – in order to contribute to broader debates about the emergence of modernity and its links with privatization.

We are certainly not the first to seek to understand when or how modernity begins. Theodore Rabb, for instance, seeks to identify the endpoint of the Renaissance which, in his view, is also the dawn of modernity. In his excellent little history, *The Last Days of the Renaissance*, he contends that Luther’s work marks the end of the Renaissance, and that his was in its inception an inherently Renaissance project (2006: 112). We endorse his attempt to push the genesis of modernity back beyond where most historians (especially Marxist or economically oriented ones) are prepared to contend. We would add, though, that there is a further need to speculate that the devastating effects of Luther’s project might *themselves* be the first wave of privatization – and it is to these dimensions that we now turn.

Theological Genesis

We begin our account of the moral transformation of privatization in the first wave, which is most visible in philosophy and the politics of the subject. We do this in full awareness that for many in the field of politics and other such social sciences, modernity comes much later. Yet the historical

priority of the moral transformation of the early Reformation manifests itself within a century in legal – and “political philosophy” – discourses.

Of all our arguments concerning privatization, the one the basis of which is already established is the series of theological controversies that devastated Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. We call this entire process *theological privatization*. Theological privatization did *not* remain confined to the Protestant religions, but inflected mimetically the Catholic Church too, especially in the reactive counter-reformation that followed. The crucial shift lay in the emphasis on the personal relationship to God. From the point of view of this analysis, this relationship as actualized in the first of many ways in the Reformation, and Martin Luther’s ultimate break with the Roman Catholic Church.

What caused the shift? As to what led to this to take place, Charles Taylor writes perceptively of the early stirring of “reform” well before the onset of the Reformation itself:

The Reformation is the ultimate fruit of the Reform spirit, producing for the first time a true uniformity of believers, a leveling up which left no further room for different speeds. If salvation by faith had been the issue of ultimate importance, co-existence might have been conceivable. But where the driving force was reform, a split in Christendom was inevitable. It was reform, further inflamed by a hatred of idolatry, which animated the grim-faced worshippers Erasmus saw emerging from the Church in Basel. (Taylor, 2007: 77). The grim-faced worshippers, of course, were the earliest privatizers, the ones whose campaign changed everything. Taylor’s observation that far from producing heterogeneity, that this was a *leveling of belief* is entirely consistent with what we might expect in the dawn of modernity and of the privatizing moral order. Accompanying the change, as Taylor has pointed out in many places (including both books in our reference list), is the “inward turn”: the new Protestant, and then Counter-Reformation forces all shared in the intensification of belief, in the development of an inner sensibility, and indeed, of responsibility, to God and to self. The inward turn provides the very space for other later topographies of the subject, as the self gains shape and depth in succeeding centuries (especially in the nineteenth century).

If we see fully fledged privatization at work in the seventeenth century, we can rightly say that the process was “born” in the early Reformation. To be sure, it can sometimes be a mistake to trace the origin to the point at which the “idea” becomes thinkable, because this is to apply retrospective force to a history that was not realized or evident. The climate of reform in the Middle Ages, that Taylor alludes to (2007: 77), do no more than afford *potentialities that need external realization*. The nuance is important, because, as John Milbank insists, to see the origin as coinciding with the first moments of potentiality is to make a category error of sorts with history:

If Christianity ushers in the modern world, then, right from the start, Christianity must be understood in these terms. Thus Troeltsch and Weber fail to see individualism,

voluntarism, fideism, and Kantian ethicization as contingent *changes* in Christian doctrine and ethos, but project these things back into the beginnings of Christianity and even the Old Testament. The history of the West is turned into the always-coming-to-be of liberal Protestantism or its secular aftermath. (1994: 93)

There is a difference between the claim that privatization is a potential structure of early Christianity, and seeing this as a destiny. Further we should avoid being tempted to conclude that early Christian theological structures map without residue onto contemporary problematics and social realities (thus mirroring the mistake fundamentalists invariably make – of reading Genesis as though it were an incipient counter-Darwinism, a sacred text lying in wait for the historical appearance of its adversary), and seeing those contemporary problematics and realities as relatively novel iterations of older struggles.

Equally, as to Taylor's notion that the reform movement in much earlier Christendom is foundational, we can ourselves point to other causal factors. Certeau, for instance, points to the shock of discovery of the New World, the realization of plural belief, and an entirely new need to rethink alterity (218-19). We could also, as many have done, point to the McLuhanesque "Gutenberg galaxy" that arises with the invention of printing presses. These are co-occurring factors, all with their contribution. What arises, however, is a space of astonishing plurality, unprecedented in history. In this respect, Certeau's observations in the same book are extremely important. He argues that plural belief *itself* leads to a new and radical uncertainty, as

doctrinal criteria are discredited by the very fact of their opposition... The antimony (indeed the aggressivity) among groups wins over the disputes concerning truth; it involves a scepticism that can be observed everywhere; it also prepares (and already sketches) a *nonreligious* type of certitude – that is, participation in civil *society*. Because of its fragmentation into coexisting and mutually warring churches, the values once invested in the Church appear directed toward political or national unity.... Thus the nation is born. (1988: 127)

In these profound lines, we see the very genesis of the things we are seeking to establish (and even some, like nation, that we are not). The nonreligious certitude at stake for Certeau is the one that emerges after the wars of Reformation, and it is the one that is determinedly plural, and pluralizing. Once these wars had wrought their damage, the plural space of secular society gains new and *modern* force, with each individual entitled to his or her own "private" belief – and *this* is the basis of the unfolding of privatization in all the other spheres which followed. In each of these domains, we find a *morally* imperative dimension to the version of the private being advocated or imposed. We turn next to the philosophical articulation of private space in general (philosophy), and then in the philosophical underpinning of a morally privatized law and economics.

Philosophical Genesis

We use the word “philosophical” cautiously – and likewise the positioning of some of the figures we trace: Descartes and Locke in particular do not accord with the familiar picture aficionados of “politics” have long ascribed to them. What is at stake for us, though, is the articulation of key ideas – and at risk of disciplinary offence, we proceed.

In *Modernity’s Wager*, Adam Seligman suggests that “modern” culture and politics have embarked on a certain wager. Citing the late Renaissance wager by the philosopher Pascal that reason would vindicate faith, he suggests a modern equivalent: a transcendental reason founding an “authoritative loss of sacrality” would need for its basis a new sceptical idiom to give “modernity’s wager” any chance of success (2000: 12). In place of an apparently crumbling Christian order, he offers a new basis for a tolerant society, posing “the beginnings of a very different type of argument for tolerance and for pluralism, based not on a privatized conscience but on a sceptical one” (2000: 13). Privatization, for Seligman, refers to the retreat of religion from the public domain, becoming “more and more of the congregant’s internal value disposition” (2000: 13). The trouble, he acknowledges at the outset of his book, is that “pluralism and tolerance seem to hold only as long as religion is privatized” (2000: 13).^v

In seeking to name the foundations of his alternative, he does not mention Descartes, but rather the scene of the Reformation on the one hand, and its uptake of Pyrrhonism on the other (2000: 137). The latter tradition held that “the reasons in favour of a belief are never better than those against” (Honderich, 1995: 733). But Descartes’ role in all this *cannot* be downplayed. His brilliant contestation and redeployment of classical scepticism, is after all, one of the reasons we recall this conjunction of periods *at all* (cf. Williams, 1978: 27). Seligman finds this appropriation problematic almost for this reason: it is as if he (somewhat like Rousseau in *The Natural Contract*) would like to play Dr Who momentarily, go back, and throw the switch in a different direction. For Seligman, the promise of a true scepticism that might be both modest and respectful involves overcoming a history of this Cartesian variety:

Historically, the emergence in the West of the argument for a tolerance based on scepticism was overtaken by three developments: (1) the liberal argument for autonomy and (2) the process of secularization itself, which obviated the very need for a religious tolerance. To this we must add (3) the Cartesian revolution, which reoriented the whole issue of certitude as well as the position of the knowing subject. The contingency of history aside, a principled tolerance is indeed a difficult position to maintain, as it would seem that people have a marked preference for some sort of certitude. (2000: 138)

And that is putting it mildly: the contingency of history—350 years worth cannot easily be set aside—nor can the desire for certitudes be ignored. While Seligman’s is an engaging thesis, it *itself*

depends on the earlier Cartesian innovation (or something like it) to make sense, even today. For this reason, we must put our emphasis on what *has* actually happened, on the historical turn that launched not just an idea of tolerance, but the logic of privatization itself. If the latter is not understood, a refigured tolerance or scepticism would stand no chance whatsoever.

Yet, as Seligman seems to realize, this era, and the figure of Descartes in particular, are highly suggestive. Descartes' solitary—and he claims unremarkable—thinker in the *Discourse on Method* writes his account as a “tale” of a search for truth: “In the end, I allowed myself the liberty of taking my own predicament as universal, and of concluding that nowhere in the world was there any knowledge of the kind I had been encouraged to expect” (1960: 38). In this exploration, he reasons the place of his subjectivity, as well as the possible terms of the self, and the methods appropriate to disclosing it. In particular, he takes care (‘like a man who walks along in the darkness, to go forward so slowly...that I should avoid a fall’) (1960: 48) devising rules that he can follow to effect this (1960: 50); he seeks a starting point that is “sufficiently secure” (1960: 60); thus:

I resolved to pretend that everything that had ever entered my mind was as false as the figments of my dreams. But then, immediately, as I strove to think of everything as false, I was aware of myself as something real; and observing that the truth: *I think, therefore I am* was so firm and so assured that the most extravagant arguments of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I concluded that I might have no scruple in taking it as that first principle of philosophy for which I was looking. (1960: 61)

I was aware of myself as something real: with these extraordinary lines, and a refined version of scepticism to guide the inner empiricism, Descartes turns the floodlights onto the newly constituted territories of the self, territories hitherto unknown and unexplored. What is at stake as the decisive engine of this process is, of course, foundational privatization, the work of the years just before the philosopher's birth. But the brilliance of Descartes' insight lies in the depiction of this already-constituted terrain in a way that made it able to be thought even before the “legal” and propertied implications of the new private domain had been instantiated. From now on, he tells us (and we can very well still believe it), we can talk about knowing in a new way. What can I know for sure? Not that which I'm told, not that which I read. No: what I know is that I am here because I am aware of myself thinking about or feeling such things. Certitude is to be found *within*.

And what is Descartes doing in these extraordinary lines? Even as he describes his thought processes as a chain of reasoning (what would be known as rationalism), he discloses a method to us, *and he teaches us that method in the process*. In revealing himself as a finite person confronting the problem of his own reality, *he makes us aware of ourselves as finite persons with the same problem as he has*. This is the beginning of the extension from theological and philosophical terrains of the seventeenth century to a wider field of participation – one that involves teachers. Once constituted,

privatization is not confined to the theological (and then Cartesian) scenes of generation or description. The private self we have just witnessed, as well as the private self generated in the Reformation's earliest years, is transferable to the *private* person that reasons, and in the centuries that follow, to the *legal* person, to the *economic* person, to the *voting* person, to the *psychological* patient, and so on. Each such shift is another moment in an ongoing logic, yet each can be related to all the others. Such is the paradox of privatization: it is at once a single engine of modernity, yet each time it arises, as with these breath-taking pages from the *Discourse on Method*, there is a sense of palpable excitement, a situation indeed, as Descartes put it, that up until that point, "nowhere in the world" was to be found its antecedent. In turning to theatres of application, we need to see, then, that even Descartes' analysis is itself already-applied, the first perhaps once privatization passed beyond the domain of theology.

Genesis: Economics, Law, Morality

Let us, in turning to the fields of economics and law, see how the moral dimension of the private impinges upon the conception in each case, and does so in a way relevant to us today. In the field of "economics" (if we remember these are also the dying days of kingship), values and equivalences were differently ordered and conceived, and philosophers themselves often dealt with economic matters.^{vi}

At stake is a new order of *private ownership*, with legal and economic dimensions. The idea of *habeas corpus* had circulated for many years (it is a phrase in Latin in the subjunctive mood meaning "you may have the body"). The act, however, had the very particular effect of insisting that a person be brought forth rather than being held indefinitely. Passed as it was in England in 1679, it legalized a new conception of the subject. The modest idea that there might be some legal right to "the body" is less modest if we recall the fact that the right to our control of our own belief is also, at the same time, being won.

The effect of *habeas corpus* itself was not just legal. It had many ramifications, and is itself part of a wider rethinking of the order of things and of subjects. Witness Locke in the late seventeenth century: "Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself" (1966: 15). What is at stake is both the basis of one's right to one's own self, and the need to say that this right is inalienable. Locke goes on to elaborate some consequences:

The labour of his body and the work of his hand we may say are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his

property. It being by him removed from the common state nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. (1966: 15)

The reasoning process is crucial: the fact it is possible to think this way shows how far privatization has already developed. Not only am I my own private person, I am so because I *own* myself. (Locke's "I" that owns is retrospectively and circularly, albeit in a social context, confirmed in and by the fact of ownership-capacity, as a subject). Then, because I own myself, the things this "myself" makes are also mine, because they are made with my labour, which I also own. Moreover, even if the materials I take are to start with, publicly owned, the act of "annexing" to these materials my labor also makes whatever I produce mine, and mine alone. Already fully formed in this contention is an idea of private (versus "common") property, an idea of the discrete self that is (we are told elsewhere and by implication here) free, as well as the possibility that by my owning something, I might trade it for something someone else, by the same process, has made (1966: 25).^{vii}

Locke's argument – and those like it – are fundamental to a variety of moral and legal debates, as well as to ongoing cultural anxieties. These surface and resurface unpredictably in terrains beyond economics. Sometimes, indeed, they re-emerge in surprising forms, on moral terrain. Take, for instance, the "pro life" and "pro choice" debate in the United States. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision declared unconstitutional the Texas statute outlawing all abortions (except where the life of the mother was threatened). "Jane Roe's" challenge to the Supreme Court was upheld on the basis that a woman possesses an inalienable right to act in her own self-interest, as determined the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This clause "protects against state action the right to privacy, including a woman's qualified right to terminate her pregnancy." With twenty-six mentions of "privacy" in its ruling – and other linguistic permutations like "private" – the Supreme Court concluded: "Although the results are divided, most of these courts have agreed that the right of privacy, however based, is broad enough to cover the abortion decision."^{viii} In turn, the argument of the *Roe v. Wade* decision *itself* relied on a legal precedent established by the 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* decision. This determined that the state had no right to proscribe the taking of contraceptive pills by married women – an assertion guaranteed by the right of couples to self-determination. And this claim was *itself* underwritten by – and now we shouldn't even feign surprise – the "constitutional right to privacy."^{ix}

In Locke and in Hobbes, we see that privatization is producing a new conception of the public sphere. Hence perhaps another dimension to our compound hypothesis on privatization: the public is an *effect* of privatization, not a site of foundational significance as it once had been. It exists still as a spectral domain, an echo of its former self (and it is significant that the word "common" is

used where we would often now say public; these terms were not yet quite aligned). As privatization proceeds in its new work of micrological reconfiguration, it throws up ever-new conceptual aggregations. These heaps are always constituted by abstractions, but they are not devoid of meaning – and what they *name* is not abstract. They include such things as “families,” “society,” “classes,” “community,” “workplace cultures,” “generations” and so on. These terms, and ideas, represent a base *lingua franca* of privatization, and we cannot understand a phase of privatization without them. What is important though is that these ideas (even including as we will see later the idea of the public itself) make no sense on their own terms, and this is especially so when we find manifesto-style declarations of their significance. But they are important in one sense: they are a powerful diagnostic corollary, a symptomatology of the person under privatisation. Privatization is an iterated logic, not a single thing, and while we must understand its gathering force, we need also to understand the power and shock of its always-local manifestations. Nowhere is the shock greater than in the rise, and then the destruction, of various forms of the social and of the public domain – and it is to these issues that we now must direct our attention.

“Social” and “Economic” Genesis: Milton to Sennett

We now take up the question of the public. What, after all, *is* the public? Posed in this form, it is tempting to reply, why it is *nothing* at all. But the question is wrongly cast. Even if one accepted the power of privatization over what is called the “social,” a critic should ask, what of the public arena? This, surely, predates the era of privatization, and indeed, of the social. We need to ask rather, *how* does the public domain come to be in this era? Put like this, we can answer very plainly: the public, whatever its antiquity, is in the modern era always a subordinated *effect* of privatization. This is true also of other agglomerative formations: the social, the community, the polity. But the effect is more shocking in the case of the public, as this is a field in which its very historical legacy deceives us into thinking it exists as it always did.²

Some will look askance at such a claim. Others will recognize that great aggregative abstractions like “society” did not even exist in the modern sense prior to the nineteenth century, something Margaret Thatcher realized, even without reading, when she announced that there was simply “no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (Thatcher 426). Other fields, like the polity, are creatures of the Leviathan, seventeenth century augmentations of older formations that very quickly occlude earlier versions. This makes them all very derivative structures. But, one could very validly reply, what about *the public*? That surely has a very old sense, one dating back to antiquity, and is not to be discounted.

Let us think about the public in terms of what its function was. We do not need to look back to antiquity to find what we mean: witness these lines from the seventeenth century poet, John Milton. Milton, like Locke, at once modern and somehow also caught in the weft of earlier idioms, offers a strong insight into what the ancient idea of fame may have meant. Witness these lines from “Lycidas,” his poem lamenting the death of a friend, and reflecting on the significance of human endeavour: “*Fame* is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise (That last infirmity of Noble mind)” (1938: 58). What do these lines mean? In the poem, Milton is wondering why anyone would bother with art when we could all lie around on the grass. Then the above lines suggest that “fame” might be a motivation for a clear mind. A *clear* mind? The point is that “fame” was seen as something worth striving for by people of higher talent and character. To be sure, the following line qualifies it as an “infirmity,” but it is the last one, before we get to the religious motives. The pattern is repeated everywhere in pre-seventeenth century society. Fame implied the *public*, and thereby, a kind of immortality on earth.

We now think of the public as a space. This is a modern and stripped back version of what it used to be. As Milton well remembered (though it was by then already a fading star), the public domain used also to imply a kind of time—immortal time. In Milton’s age, these were rather more recent memories, and his own quasi-heretical understanding of Christianity leant back into many earlier (including classical) traditions. Milton is a hinge between eras in that he reminds us of the grandness of fame, and thereby of the classical and postclassical conception of *the public*. In this space-time, there is radical continuity between the here and now and the hereafter. The proof, if such were needed, lay in the fact that the greats of the ancient world were still read, and in the original languages. Yet the grinding of privatization was already under way, and with it came a re-carved public, its temporality initially simply peeled away, to become ossified tradition. By the twentieth century, the site of the public was an utterly ephemeral one, in which fame was a temporary thing, in a gallery of equally banal arts whose chief merit lay not in the temporal conception (which was only the meteoric moment of youthful success), but in its existence as a *space*.

We use this term as the media theorist, Harold Innis intended it (and we do so in keeping with our footnote reference to Benedict Anderson above). For him, media are either ways of binding people across time (be it the genealogies of families or the inscription of pyramids) or across space (like the newspaper, something read by people in a defined space but not over a long period of time). Innis’s argument, with which we very much concur, is that given social orders have a bias one way or the other (towards space, towards time). It is certainly an easily deployable idea. Celebrity culture as a whole is a convenient index of just how far the bias in favour of space has strengthened in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Be it the travails of Paris Hilton or Britney Spears, fame-

seventeenth century style is no longer the key. Where many commentators are concerned about its unearned nature, so busy are they in passing moral judgement, they miss its essential ingredient. Celebrity differs from fame of Milton's kind in that it is *ephemeral and ubiquitous*. In one sense, this reflects shifts in media of transmission. Time-binding media – like pyramids (or epics by Homer, Virgil, and Milton) – endure over eras, finding audiences in generations always still to come. Space-binding media on the other hand are disseminated to everyone immediately, and then forgotten tomorrow.

Yet beyond the purely structural determinism of Innis or McLuhan, we can also point to the *moralizing* energies at stake in all these celebrities: Hilton and Spears are moral privateers – and our fickle fascination with them hinges on the clash between their public personas and their private struggles and frailties; like the victims of myth, communal perception and representations of them waver between reverence and loathing (Cf. Fleming 52, 59-60). So too are all the true celebrities, who are such not because of their artistic or sporting talent etc, but rather, because of the potential moral transformations they exert on all of us. When interviewed, successful sportsmen and women talk only of work, diligence, and sacrifice – never of genetics, happenstance, or ambivalence; and none would dare admit, after winning, that it's "only a game"; only "losers" can respectably articulate this view. In other words, the celebrity always promises to offer us some lesson – positive or negative – in virtue.

Understandably, perhaps, many have voiced their concern about how increasing "celebritization" changes the public arena negatively – or perhaps even spells the end of the public arena. Some have offered their laments, and it is easy to become dismissive. Concerning this, however, it is precisely now that we should *not* be glib or inattentive. Rather, we need to explore existing conceptions of the public, to offer further analysis of "where it has gone," or indeed, to see whether it ever was. In our view, no one has written of this demise with more perspicacity and care than Richard Sennett. His *Fall of Public Man* addresses the issue of the private directly and in ways that approach the terms we need to understand privatization. Because he sees the process of privatization as driven purely by what he calls the "impact" of capitalism on public life, he interprets all privatizing switches in terms of division and breakdown. In this respect, he does not see that his reified category—public life—has become as spectral as the other aggregates he goes on to condemn (community, in particular). The categories Sennett uses are largely sociological; we recognize Weber, Simmel, Tönnies in his nuanced accounts of charisma, social personality, and *Gemeinschaft*. Yet he shows that the private/public configuration has a distinctly modern structure.

In the process of showing this, Sennett's brilliant anthropological insight is to grasp the link between the sundering of natural and cultural domains on the one hand, and private and public

domains on the other. In terms that resonate profoundly with Charles Taylor's accounts of the history of human rights, and also with the work of Benedict Anderson, Sennett suggests that the private itself has a genesis. It was not, he contends, "born full-grown":

The geography of the capital city served its citizens as one way to think about nature and culture, by identifying the natural with the private, culture with the public. By interpreting certain psychic processes as inexpressible in public terms, as transcendent, quasi-religious phenomena...they crystallized for themselves one way...in which natural rights could transcend the entitlements of any particular society. The more the opposition of nature and culture through the contrast of private and public became tangible, the more the family was viewed as a natural phenomenon. (1977: 90)

Prior to the advent of the private in this sense, public and private were "not so much contraries as alternatives" (1977: 98). The split in this "molecule" (as he calls it) he traces from the eighteenth century. We see now that Thatcher's reference to the family is no quirk of personality or history; it is at the root of the reconfiguration of the public that Sennett describes, and is to be linked to privatization-in-general.

Sennett dates the transformation from the eighteenth century. To do this, he has to set aside a number of obvious—and in our view, definitive—objections. Surely, we object, the shift occurs much earlier, in the failed revolutionary projects of English Puritanism (and republicanism), or in the legal constitution of the subject-as-individual, or at least Locke. Sennett cannot avoid the latter since the crucial catalyst in his view is the rise of a notion of liberty. This, then, is how he deals with Locke:

What would happen, then, is an idea of rights in society took hold....When people in the 18th century began to toy with the notion of liberty, they began to experiment with an idea outside this context [the natural order of moderation]. Liberty as a principle, a structure of social relations, could be encompassed neither by the idea of convention nor by the idea of natural sympathy. To be sure, earlier social-contract theorists like John Locke preached an idea of natural liberty, but it could not be practised easily. When such an idea was introduced into ordinary social life, the molecule of public and private could be broken. (1977: 99)

We view this a little differently. The "molecule" is itself a misleading metaphor, even if the picture Sennett wants to paint of the society where individual and private were not yet aligned in opposition to public is perfectly valid. The point is, as he says himself, that in the earlier state of things, private and public were not contraries; they were different facets of *the same thing*.

This is why our line of questioning is different from Sennett's. Instead of asking how "the social broke in two," into the domains of private and public, we ask *how* the process of privatization began, and *when* the idea of the private emerges as a descriptor for a distinct domain of transacted reality. In response to this question, we are actually able to be guided by Sennett's own assertion that

the private was not “born full-grown.” That is to say, in the spirit of anthropological hypothesis, we say both that it was “born” (had an origin) *and* it was *not fully formed* at the moment of that origin. In this respect, the seventeenth century is a far more suggestive place to look that Sennett thinks, and even it turns out to be a staging post in the process of privatization which is “born” in the preceding century, and has its ancestry in the post-Renaissance onset of modernity itself.

Capitalism and Privatization: The Moral Significance of *Anomie*

We have seen, throughout this essay, the way in which the narrow privatizations of the 1980s can be related to privatization-in-general. We have also argued that privatization has occurred in a range of sometimes apparently unrelated spheres. This is why we have spoken of the *logic* of privatization. It would be easy, as we have done so far, to say no more about the relationship of economic conditions to privatization to privatization-in-general than we have pointed out in our analysis of Thatcherism. Yet in the spirit of an open and compound hypothesis, we see value in tracing the return of the private to the very sense of self, and in our times at least, of the self in crisis.

Emile Durkheim’s powerful study of suicide appeared at the turn of the twentieth century and offers a profound thesis about the relationship between the order of society, economic conditions, and the sense of self. This turns on his idea of *anomie*, which is the word he uses for the existential malaise which envelops the modern subject where and when social norms become blurred and unclear. *Anomie*, our readers will recognize swiftly, is a symptom of privatization: it is the name for the shock that happens in any given wave of privatization, in any field. In Durkheim’s hands, though, he has concentrated his interest in this phenomenon in the field of economic change.

His two volume work outlines a succession of usually-advanced theses on suicide (from psychological and cosmic factors to mimetic contagion), but treats all of these as inadequate on their own. He then, in the second volume, advances four varieties of suicide: the egoistic, the altruistic, the anomic, and the regulatory. These four are in fact two pairs. The egoistic suicide is a result of breakdown in established socio-theological order, as we find in the privatization of spirit. His example is Protestantism, in which he locates far higher suicide rates than in Catholic countries and locations. His formulation that the “Protestant is far more the author of his faith” is a description of pure *and originary* privatization (1950: 158). Moreover, as people have to “think through” their own solutions, there can also be found a higher rate of suicide among more educated people than those living in dire poverty. The altruistic suicide—an ongoing example of which is the Indian bride who commits suicide after her husband’s death—is to be opposed in a binary sense to the suicide of ego. Where the former is caused by the breakdown of community, the community’s norms themselves

cause the latter. What we see in the first pairing, then, is that these are linked to the original forms of privatization, the first as its process, the second as what it breaks down.

The other pair are examples of derived privatization, and work in exactly the same way.

Anomie is result of the breakdown in norms that results from economic or political change:

Man's characteristic privilege is that the bond he accepts is not physical but moral; that is, social. He is governed not by a material environment brutally imposed on him, but by a conscience superior to his own, the superiority of which he feels. Because the greater, better part of his existence transcends the body, he escapes the body's yoke, but is subject to that of society. But when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions; thence comes the sudden rises in the curve of suicides which we have pointed out. (1950: 252)

Note how Durkheim's self is itself already privatized in the scenario he outlines – with both the body and society both floating free of the self, and impinging upon its agency. The shocks Durkheim alludes to are precisely those we have sought to evoke in this essay. Strictly speaking, both poles of what Durkheim identifies as powerfully suicide-inducing—egoism and anomie—are derivatives of privatization in general (but egoistic patterns are also, as we have said, part of the *first* variety that took place in the privatization of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century). What is really powerful in Durkheim's account is the palpable sense of shock that privatization brings when massive economic or political change takes place, *even when this change is for the best*.

Durkheim then goes on to suggest something even more profound: change in society of the anomic kind happens from time to time and triggers an upsurge in suicides. But in the field of what he calls “trade and industry” alone, anomie is “actually in a chronic state” (1950: 254). In this respect, those who see even economic deregulation and privatization as a complete novelty would do well to pay attention these lines: “For a whole century [1800-1900], economic progress has mainly consisted in freeing industrial relations from all regulation. Until very recently, it was the function of a whole system of moral forces to exert this discipline” (1950: 254). The religious bridle Durkheim saw as withering before the force of privatizing deregulation was, we know, succeeded by legislative frameworks. These, however, also collapsed under the weight of privatization, with very much the same effect pattern that Durkheim described. To repeat, privatization throws up many new aggregates—such as the regulatory pattern that happened after the second world war in many societies—but it can also cast these aside, and do so on the same moral basis that led to their erection in the first place.

Hypothesizing Privatization-in-General

Readers who have persisted to this point of the essay are now in a position to grasp both the nature of the hypothesis concerning privatization-in-general as well as its compound nature. For this reason, for reasons of clarity, as well as of recapitulation, we restate it on its own terms.

1. Privatization is a *general* process, in that it motivates and applies to many more derivative processes.
2. Privatization-in-general is a *qualified* process, since it has not existed since time immemorial. It had a genesis in a particular place and time, and within a particular cultural formation.
3. Privatization-in-general is an anthropologically significant process, as it describes the workings of an entire culture and belief system. The fact that this “culture” happens to be the West and that the “belief system” is a distinctively sacred-atheism (see below) does not detract from this fact. It bears noting that the fact it is part of a human group, and that it is disseminated by such groups does not make even more derivative ideas (“society” and the “public”) prevail over it.
4. Privatization-in-general is part of the sacred structure of the West, and is centred on the belief in the sacrality of personhood (a Christian notion).
5. Notwithstanding the qualifications pertaining to its genesis, privatization-in-general is in our time an almost universal process, pertaining to almost all cultures in the world today, and to all that can be called “modern” (see below).
6. Privatization-in-general and modernity in the true sense are coterminous. The former is the engine of the latter; the latter is not exhausted by the former (modernity is oriented by belief systems: hence, on the one hand, we do not discount technological innovations as having occasional motivating force in their own right; on the other hand, we would severely qualify – though not completely deny – economic determinisms).
7. Privatization-in-general motivates a series of particular orders of the private, even if these sometimes (almost always) travel under other names.
8. A particular early historical sequence is visible in the unfolding of privatization-in-general. It began exigently in the domain of the sacred – theology – in the early Reformation tracts (and responses to these tracts) of Luther. From these limited beginnings, it gained articulation – in philosophy, for want of a better word – in the resurgence of Pyrrhonism as a possibility in the late sixteenth century, and given articulation by Descartes. Within a further century, the definition of self in innovations like *habeas corpus* (law), and then in economics became possible. While we have not had space to trace it, similar profound shifts took place within

the arts, and most startlingly of all, in educational pedagogy. By the end of the seventeenth century, privatization-in-general gains full force of generality in the West.

9. Privatization's appurtenances with the sacred have peculiar force and complexity in that motivates an apparent paradox. This is the sacred nature of secularity itself in the West. We have not traced this argument in detail, but rather have given references to those who have (Zagzebski, Milbank and Bandera). The apparent secularity of the West is largely illusory in an anthropological sense, as the sacred nature of personhood remains intact.

Notes

ⁱ Like modernity itself, it is as much a logic as it is an ensemble of technologies or structure. In a related argument, we will suggest that modernity itself is most usefully viewed as an ensemble of practices that are governed principally by cultural or even, to delineate our contention, moral, logics.

ⁱⁱ The moral order, and not technology or economics (and so on), is the privileged domain in any exploration of the emergence of modernity. Even in sociological definitions, we find an ineliminable moral dimension that needs explaining. Privatization-in-general drives modernity – and we need to be able to identify and to describe it wherever it appears.

ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, as we shall see later, some historians (like Theodore Rabb) have taken the seventeenth century itself as the dawn of modernity. For us, modernity is transformed by waves of privatization. The points of origin that we signal – the declaration of Martin Luther, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Thatcherism – are all important in this account because for us, unlike for some others, modernity is a process and is culture-bound.

^{iv} The origin of the word “secular” lies in the Christian theological distinction between the saeculum (historical time) and the eschaton (the end times)(Milbank 9).

^v This could be read in one of two ways: that pluralism and tolerance only hold if religion does not exert theocratic power in the public domain –or that pluralism and tolerance only hold if religion is maintained, but privately held and expressed. We're sure that Seligman means the former – but we are also obliged to consider the second as a genuine theoretical possibility, whether Seligman intends it or not.

^{vi} This, we should emphasise, is a very quick sketch.

^{vii} We followed many others in saying that that privatization-in-general emerges in the sixteenth century Reformation. In its wake, we see an always nascent modernity. To repeat, this is also the first privatization in the modern sense, from which all others follow. Contract theory, like that of Locke or Hobbes is a derivative of this, but applied now to the secular domain. The contract, as others have noted, is the profane version of the covenant; the foundational link between property and the private is a transposition of terms from the sacred to the profane.

^{viii} Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)

^{ix} Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965).1

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