

If Christ Was a Cowboy: A Weberian Reading of *Deadwood*

David Joseph Deutch

Introduction

The television series *Deadwood* (2004-2006) contains a complex interplay of historical figures and romantic imaginings to present the viewer with a three-season representation of the development of the modern Western world through the microcosm of the *Deadwood* gold mining camp. The creator's original intention was to make a program set in Rome around the time of Christ, with the purpose of depicting the birth of Western civilisation.¹ However, due to conflicts, a change in the time and place of the drama was required. As such, the series depicts the (somewhat ironic) development of the West within the microcosm of the 'Wild West' of the United States.

Due to the fact that *Deadwood* seeks to provide an overview of the development of Western civilisation, it is possible only to provide narrow interpretations of the themes at play throughout the overall narrative. As such, this article will focus on the development of modern capitalism in the camp, using Max Weber's theory that Protestant Christianity played a role in aiding this development. As a result, this article will show that the development of capitalism within the camp in turn reflects its development in the macrocosm of the Western world. The fundamental argument presented here is that the three seasons of *Deadwood* each correspond to one of William I. Robinson's three "epochs of capitalistic development."² It will be demonstrated that the fundamental aspects of these epochs are manifested in specific characters in each season. To adequately discern the

David Joseph Deutch is a Master's Candidate in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, and works for the United Nations.

¹ Horace Newcomb, 'In the Beginning... *Deadwood*', in *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, ed. Diane Winston (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), pp. 43-68.

² William Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class and State in a Transnational World* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 4.

If Christ Was a Cowboy

nature of these characters, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, which was first published in Germany in 1905, will be utilised. By employing this multi-faceted methodology, it becomes possible to not only correlate the seasons with the "epochs of capitalistic development" but also to discern the spirits of the characters, in the Weberian sense of the word.³

The first character to be analysed is Wild Bill Hickok, the historical gunslinger. Hickok, as the atypical law-abiding gunslinger, is representative of the 'spirit' of the Wild West. As the Wild West represents a place where the division of labour and the loss of means of production were not present, this 'spirit' is decisively pre-capitalist. At the beginning of the series, the camp has already begun to progress in the direction of the development of capitalism. As such, Hickok, as the embodiment of the Holy Spirit of the old West, is foreign to the world that he rides into in the first episode. Hickok's Christlike self-sacrifice, in episode four of the first season, at the poker table of the Number 10 saloon, represents the death of not only the spirit of the Old West but also of the era of pre-capitalism. The second character, or epoch, to be discussed at length is Seth Bullock. Bullock is the historical figure that is credited with helping bring the rule of law to Deadwood camp.⁴ In the same way that the Puritans believed the Spirit of Christ acted through them, so too does the spirit of Hickok act through Bullock; due to the influence Hickok has had on him, Bullock adheres to the Protestant concept of a 'calling,' in the form of being an agent of law enforcement in the camp. As such, Bullock represents the adherence to the 'Protestant ethic,' which in turn allows the 'spirit of capitalism' to take hold.

The final character to be discussed is George Hearst. Hearst, during his life, headed the largest private mining company of the time, which later birthed the "Hearst publishing empire."⁵ While Hearst only makes his appearance in the camp in the third season, his impact is swift and

³ Max Weber, following G. W. F. Hegel, understood each historical era to manifest a particular 'spirit' that manifested in social, economic and political structures. See R. J. Holton, 'Max Weber, "Rational Capitalism," and Renaissance Italy: A Critique of Cohen,' *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 89, no. 1 (1983), pp. 166-180.

⁴ David Wolff, *Seth Bullock: Black Hills Lawman* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2009), p. 44.

⁵ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (New York: Mariner Books, 2001), pp. 39-40.

permanent. Hearst, due to his pursuit of profit as the highest order of life, devoid of any sort of religiously based ethical system, represents Weber's pinnacle of capitalistic development. This article engages in-depth textual analysis to show that, in the microcosm of Deadwood camp, capitalistic development is traced through its three epochs, which correspond to the three seasons of *Deadwood*. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that the 'spirit' of each specific epoch is embodied by one character in each season.

Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (1905)

The notion that Christianity has played a part in the development of modern Western capitalism is fundamental to Weber's model of the emergence of modernity from the Catholic Middle Ages. Thus it is necessary to sketch the content of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). This section will define what both the "Protestant ethic" and the "spirit of capitalism" signify in Weber's work. Weber concedes early on in his text that 'capitalism,' in the form of mercantilism, has existed well before the death of the historical Jesus.⁶ He therefore seeks to differentiate the simple trading of goods for gain from the 'capitalism' of the modern period, dating from the Reformation.

For Weber, the aspect that provides this differentiation is the fundamental 'spirit' in which the enterprise is undertaken. The 'spirit' in question is characterised by the desire to accumulate capital as an end in itself.⁷ For the accumulation of capital for capital's sake to be an overwhelming desire there needs to be a fundamental disdain for the mere accumulation of indulgent goods. As such, in Weber's 'spirit,' this desire for gain for the pure sake of capital is complemented by the "avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life."⁸ Weber states that these two aspects of the 'spirit' have taken hold when, "[m]an is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs."⁹ This is the definition of the 'spirit of capitalism' that is employed in this article.

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (Surrey: George Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1930]), p. 52.

⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 58.

⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 58.

⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 53.

Fundamental to Weber's analysis of the 'spirit of capitalism' is the Protestant ethic, or the beliefs that he claims assisted the rise of this 'spirit.' As these Protestant ethics play a fundamental role in *Deadwood*, it is necessary to provide a succinct overview of their constituents. For Weber, Luther's conception of a 'worldly calling' was the first step towards the development of the 'spirit of capitalism.' Part of this new-found asceticism was the principle that a person's completion of their worldly affairs was the highest form that their moral activity could assume.¹⁰ In conjunction with the doctrine of predestination, the notion developed that an individual who showed diligence in their worldly calling and who in turn was blessed by material prosperity as a result of their works, demonstrated grace, and was thus one of those chosen to ascend to heaven.¹¹ As a result of the combination of these concepts, Calvinists and related groups of Protestants "looked upon the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself as highly reprehensible; but the attainment of it as a fruit of labour in calling was a sign of God's blessing."¹² Therefore, according to Weber, the concept of bearing fruits through one's labour combined with the Calvinist disdain for worldly goods facilitated the 'spirit of capitalism.'

The Three Epochs of Global Capitalism

While it accepts the schema of the 'epochs,' it must be noted that this article does not endorse a supersessionist conception of history.¹³ These epochs serve the purpose of categorising dominant streams of thought, but this article does not assert that these were the only streams present in a particular age. If anything, *Deadwood* endorses the idea that ages 'bleed' into each other, and there are no clear-cut temporal divisions. Since we have established these epochs as interpretive tools, it is appropriate to consider the ways they are employed.

The first epoch of the capitalistic development is the age of 'primitive accumulation.' According to Marx, the age of primitive accumulation is representative of the 'original sin,' which has brought

¹⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 80.

¹¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 104.

¹² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 172.

¹³ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 13.

humanity to its current point of indentured servitude.¹⁴ In other words, ‘primitive accumulation’ brought about the opening of humanity’s eyes to the possibility of a capitalistic system. In the same way that Adam and Eve ate the apple in Genesis, so too did the accumulation of stock come before the division of labour.¹⁵ As such, the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ was the period that permitted the build-up of surplus wealth, which facilitated the later expansion of a production-based economy. This accumulation of surplus wealth came through the exploitation of natural resources and the colonialist system.¹⁶ Since Marx makes specific reference to the “discovery of gold and silver in the Americas” as an important event in this age, we can assert that this age holds extreme relevance in the gold mining camp of Deadwood.¹⁷ As such, it will become apparent that the epoch of ‘primitive accumulation’ corresponds to the first season of *Deadwood* and that it is heralded in by Hickok’s death.

The second epoch of capitalism is referred to as the era of ‘classical’ capitalism. According to Robinson, this era is characterised by the industrial revolution, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the forging of the ‘nation state,’ as highlighted by the French Revolution.¹⁸ Essentially, what occurs in this era is the solidification of the institutions that facilitate modern capitalism. These facilitating institutions, combined with the ‘Protestant ethic,’ allow capitalism to take a definitive hold as the dominant system in the West. It will therefore become apparent that the second season corresponds with the era of ‘classical capitalism,’ as heralded in by Bullock’s ‘Protestant ethic.’

The rise of monopoly capitalism characterises the third epoch of capitalistic development. As the name suggests, this epoch is characterised by the acquisition of the means of production by an extremely limited number of people. Due to this accumulation of vast wealth by a few, those who control the means of production begin to assert their material power over other facets of society.¹⁹ As such, with this era also comes the integration of previously excluded institutions, such as the state and the

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (St Ives: Penguin Books, 1990 [1867]), p. 874.

¹⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* (London: Penguin Books, 1999 [1776]), p. 167. See also Genesis 3:5-7.

¹⁶ Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, p. 4.

¹⁷ Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, p. 4.

media, into the well-oiled machine of commodity circulation. This era corresponds to the third season of *Deadwood* and is embodied by George Hearst's pursuit of capital for its own sake, devoid of any religiously based ethical system.

The 'Wild West' as the Western World: A Historical Overview

Deadwood begins at a critical point in the development of the United States. The issue of most immediate relevance at this point of its history is the war of primitive accumulation with the Teton Sioux and the Northern Cheyenne people.²⁰ Under the terms of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, the Black Hills and surrounding territory was given to a coalition of Native American tribes.²¹ Due to the discovery of gold by an expedition led by the Civil War hero General Custer in 1874, White settlers flocked to the area and the military was unable, or refused, to prevent them. As a result, The Great Sioux War broke out in 1876.²² The series commences a short while after the crushing defeat of General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn. As a result of the historical context, the notion of primitive accumulation, which includes the detachment of Native American populations from their land, is a fundamental starting point for the series.²³

The series follows two characters in particular, and tracks the way these two drive the development of the camp. The first character is Seth Bullock. In the first episode of the series Bullock leaves his post as a marshal in Montana to start a hardware business with his partner Sol Star. Their arrival at the camp coincides with that of the historical gunslinger, and famed lawman, Wild Bill Hickok. Bullock quickly becomes friendly with Hickok and his various disciples. Due to this relationship, Bullock is profoundly affected by Hickok's death at the hands of the coward, Jack McCall. From this event onwards, Bullock's volatility is a recurring theme as he oscillates between reckless rage-fuelled acts and adherence to his 'calling' as lawman of the camp. The second season begins with the arrival

²⁰ Jerome Green (ed.), *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views on the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), p. xiii

²¹ Paul Hedren, *Fort Laramie and The Great Sioux War* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 3.

²² Hedren, *Fort Laramie and The Great Sioux War*, p. 3

²³ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, p. 874.

of his deceased brother's wife and child, whom he has taken on as his own. Their arrival marks Bullock's adherence to his civic and personal duties.

The second character is an antagonist to Bullock, in the sense that he is in complete control at all times, and realises his objectives through sly and unethical means. It could be claimed that, if Bullock is accepted as a disciple of Christ, that Al Swearengen is a vessel of Satan. Swearengen is the unofficial 'boss' of the camp, as he has built the camp from the ground up. Throughout the series, he runs the camp from his office in his delightful establishment, which is called the Gem Saloon. Not only is the Gem his base of operations, it is also the town's prime supplier of "whiskey" and "snatch."²⁴ Swearengen is cruel, ruthless and vengeful, whilst being charming, articulate and highly intelligent. He is thus Bullock's opponent from the start until the second season, following an exorcism-like assisted passing of a gallstone.²⁵ After the 'evil' departs Al Swearengen's body, he and Bullock embrace their callings to further the camp's development. While Bullock undertakes this project through the law, Swearengen progresses it through murder and bribes. He is instrumental in having the camp annexed to South Dakota and forms the first semblance of a municipal council. Following the achievement of the status of a town, these two put all differences aside as to unite against the monopolising force that is George Hearst. The series concludes with the two doing everything they can to limit Hearst's control of the camp. Although it may appear that they won this battle for the camp, men like Hearst end up owning the world, in the way that those in charge of modern corporate monopolies do today.²⁶

The Civil War of European Christendom: The Significance of Reverend Smith

Since this analysis revolves around concepts which originated with the Protestant Reformation, it follows that there must be some implicit or explicit mention of this event in the series. Since the American Civil War is a fundamental theme of the program and it, too, produced a divided house,

²⁴ David Milch and Jody Worth, 'Reconnoitering the Rim,' *Deadwood: Season One*, director Davis Guggenheim (HBO, 2004).

²⁵ Ted Mann, 'Requiem for a Gleet,' *Deadwood: Season Two*, director Alan Taylor (HBO, 2005).

²⁶ Fremont Older and William Wilke, *The Life of George Hearst, California Pioneer* (Eugene, OR: John Henry Nash, 1933).

If Christ Was a Cowboy

we can discern that the Civil War is representative of the Protestant Reformation. This claim is furthered by the fact that the only explicitly religious character has been fundamentally damaged by his time in the Civil War. Reverend H.W. Smith served as a nurse during the conflict and, as a result, is slightly crazed and unstable. He represents traditional European Christendom. In the same way that European Christendom was “torn asunder by a violent revolution from which it has never fully recovered,” so too was Smith by his time in the Civil War.²⁷

Smith meets his end in the final episode of the first season due to a brain tumour. The tumour causes fits that cause Smith to smell his own flesh rotting, and stops him feeling a divine presence when he engages with scripture.²⁸ If we follow with the notion that Smith is representative of European Christendom, it can then be said that the tumour represents the age of the Enlightenment. The mental facilities that Christendom helped set up, in the form of scholastic universities, are the very institutions which undermine it.²⁹ Smith’s sense of his own flesh rotting is representative of the diminishing power of institutions of Christendom. It is therefore no coincidence that in this same episode Al Swearengen inaugurates the first municipal positions, including mayor and sheriff.

The two events, when combined, amount to the conclusion that as enlightenment-influenced institutions of the modern state develop, Christendom begins to decline. What is necessary to take away from this brief interlude is the importance that Christendom had in the development of the modern Western world. It has laid the foundations for the majority of Western institutions and, as such, this analysis is teeming with religious importance, whether it is wholly explicit or more implicit. It is important to remember that the Reverend represents the old ways of the camp not as a way of life that has been superseded but as a mode of existence which has been used as foundations for further development.

²⁷ Lewis Hopfe and Mark Woodward, *Religions of the World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 1998), p. 327.

²⁸ George Putnam, ‘No Other Sons and Daughters,’ *Deadwood: Season One*, director Ed Bianchi (HBO, 2004).

²⁹ Marvin Perry, *Western Civilization: A Brief History* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2008), p. 160.

Christ as a Cowboy: Season One

Season One: The Age of 'Primitive Accumulation'

Season One of *Deadwood* corresponds with the rise of the age of 'primitive accumulation.' As the primary characteristics of 'primitive accumulation' are the expansion of the colonial system and the exploitation of native resources, this equivocation becomes wholly evident. Surprisingly, for a show about a gold camp, the first season is the one that pays the most attention to the discovery of gold. The most prominent gold discovery of the season is on a plot owned by a Mr Brom Garrett. Garrett is a man of high society from New York who has been fooled by Al Swearengen into purchasing an apparently 'tapped out' gold claim. Garrett is quick to become aware that he has been duped and, as such, is killed by Dan Dority, one of Swearengen's cronies.³⁰ The claim falls to Mrs Alma Garrett, his opium-addicted wife, also from New York, who finds out that the claim is in fact a 'bonanza.' The Garrett gold claim eventually becomes workable and produces a large amount of mineral wealth for the holder. The Garretts are people of high society, far from home in search of both adventure and greater fortune than they already possess. The obvious connotation of the Garrett gold claim is the European nobility's exploitation of mineral resources in "the new world."³¹ If we take this connotation into account, the conclusion that season one correlates to the age of 'primitive accumulation' is supported.

The other notable aspect of the epoch of 'primitive accumulation,' which is present in season one, is the exploitation of native peoples. Throughout the first season, the camp is situated illegally in Indian Territory. This, coupled with the fact that the early episodes of the show take place shortly after Custer's last stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn, illustrates that colonial exploitation is manifest in the camp's very existence. Bullock's brutal hand-to-hand fight with a Sioux man in episode six demonstrates that colonial themes are crucial to the first season. Both colonial confrontation and exploitation of natural resources are central to

³⁰ Elizabeth Sarnoff, writer, 'Here Was a Man,' *Deadwood: Season One*, director Alan Taylor (HBO, 2004).

³¹ Lyle McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World, 1492-1700* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 208.

the first season, cementing the identification of this season with the epoch of ‘primitive accumulation.’

Hickok: The Fastest Gunfighter in the World

In the American psyche, the Wild West represents a period of possibility. It epitomises the romantic image of an age where the only limits were human abilities. With a little bit of ingenuity and horse skill, a man (and on occasion a woman, for example, Annie Oakley, Belle Starr, and Calamity Jane, born Martha Jane Canary) could make their own way. There were no bosses and no mortgages, only the horizon. For the American mind, this was the true age of rugged individualism.³² In *Deadwood* Wild Bill Hickok is the representative of this romantic image. He is remembered as the premier gunfighter and lawman of the age.³³ He was capable, moral, self-sufficient and the master of his own destiny. As such, from the perspective of capitalistic development, Hickok represents the spirit of the pre-capitalistic era. He is the antagonist of the division of labour,³⁴ as he was a man who could do it all. As long as he held his own guns, he was the owner of the means of production and the method of distribution was always within his grasp.

As the camp is a developing capitalist entity, Bill’s cowboy spirit is profoundly foreign to the camp. His rejection of the apparently “unalterable order of things” merely amplifies this other-worldliness.³⁵ Two examples of Bill asserting his status as not being of the current world are salient to the discussion at hand. The first comes in episode two of series one, in which Bill is having breakfast with his disciple Charlie Utter. As there is only one sub-par venue for breakfast, they coincidentally meet Bullock and Star. The dialogue is as follows:

Utter: We’ll likely be by your tent later.

Sol: (*Sitting at a table across the room*) Good!

Utter: Get Bill here outfitted with some prospectin’ gear.

Sol: Yes, Sir. (*Bill and Charlie sit down across the room.*)

Wild Bill: Don’t do that, Charlie.

³² Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), p. 15.

³³ Joseph Rosa, *Wild Bill Hickok, Gunfighter: An Account of Hickok’s Gunfights* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), p. 11.

³⁴ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, pp. 459-461.

³⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 54

Utter: Do what?

Wild Bill: Trumpet my intentions. Herd me like a damn steer.

Utter: Ain't you here to prospect gold? If you're just gonna gamble, Bill, let's get it set. I'll arrange appearance money for you at one of these joints.

Wild Bill: That ain't gambling. It's shilling for the house.

Utter: It's gettin' you a regular damn source o' income. So's this don't wind up like Cheyenne. (*Bill shoots Charlie a look.*)³⁶

What is evident from the dialogue is a multi-layered rejection of the 'unalterable order of things,' and therefore the world of the camp. Bill's disdain for being herded like a 'damn steer' is on the surface a rejection of the 'primitive accumulation' taking place in the camp. On deeper analysis, by viewing Bill as the embodiment of pre-capitalism, Bill's rejection of a 'regular source of income' becomes a disdain for the capitalistic world of the future, specifically wage slavery. His refusal to 'shill for the house' emphasises his contempt for modern capitalism, as 'shilling for the house' is akin to working while someone else holds the means of production.

Bill's realisation of his foreign nature to the world of capitalistic development is most explicit in his final dialogue with Charlie Utter. The dialogue is as follows:

Utter: If ya don't wanna prospect, I can put ya in charge of that mail route I'm gettin'.

Wild Bill: I'm doin' what I wanna do.

Utter: Bullshit!

Wild Bill: Some goddamn time, a man's due to stop arguin' with hisself. Feeling he's twice the goddamn fool he knows he is, because he can't be something he tries to be every goddamn day without once getting to dinner time and not fucking it up. I don't wanna fight it no more. Understand me, Charlie? And I don't want you pissin' in my ear about it. Can you let me go to hell the way I want to?³⁷

In the same way that Jesus Christ, after the temptation in the wilderness, knew what he needed to do, so too does Bill know his role. He has rejected the material wealth that the 'devil' has to offer, in the form of rejecting the temptation of entering into the materialistic world of 'primitive

³⁶ 'Deep Water,' *Deadwood: Season One*, Writ. David Milch & Malcolm MacRury, Director Davis Guggenheim, HBO, 2004, DVD.

³⁷ Sarnoff, 'Here Was a Man,' *Deadwood: Season One* (HBO, 2004).

If Christ Was a Cowboy

accumulation.’³⁸ As such, Bill’s command for Charlie to ‘let him go to hell the way he wants to’ represents the final declaration of Bill’s otherworldliness. He has fully come to realise that his spirit and the spirit of the world he now occupies are completely at odds. All that he sees fit to do now is sacrifice himself, which in turn allows the camp to progress into the hold of capitalistic development.

If Christ Was a Cowboy: Hickok’s Sacrifice

Christianity, while Middle Eastern in origin, is the religion of the developing West throughout the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era. In the same way that Christ’s sacrifice metaphorically gave birth to Western society, in the context of *Deadwood* Bill’s sacrifice gives birth to modern society in the microcosm of the camp. Both figures are decisively otherworldly in nature. Theologically, Christ was the Son of God and truly belonged in the heavens; Bill belongs in a romanticised Wild West where men exist unrestrained by modern institutionalised ways of living. According to the gospel narratives, Christ was required to die for humanity’s sins to allow humanity to undertake the ‘righteous path’ in his name. In Bill’s case, due to his role as the charismatic purveyor of individualism, the way of life he represented needed to die, so as to allow people to be trapped on the ‘righteous path’ of capitalistic development.³⁹ For a capitalistic society to operate effectively men need to be stationary and stripped of their own means of production and subsistence. While men hold the view that they are the makers of their own economic destiny, capitalism can never truly become dominant. As such, the romantic lifestyle that Hickok represents needs to be removed from the shared psyche of the camp. In Weberian terms, in the same way that Christ’s sacrifice eventually led to the modern development of capitalism for the macrocosm of the Western World, so too does Hickok’s death of spirit lead to the rise of modern capitalism in the microcosm of the camp. Hickok thus represents Christ if he was a cowboy.

³⁸ Matthew 4: 8-11.

³⁹ Wright, *The Wild West*, p. 117.

The Protestant Ethic: Season Two

Season Two: The Age of ‘Classical Capitalism’

Season two of *Deadwood*, rather than focusing on scuffles with Native Americans or the accumulation of gold, focuses on the camp’s development towards becoming an official territory of the United States and its technological advancements. When taking into account the characteristics of the age of ‘classical capitalism’ as previously outlined, it becomes evident that season two is a representation of the second epoch of capitalistic development. From the first episode of season two, technological advancements play a prominent role in the narrative of the camp. Within the opening minutes of the first episode, the viewer observes labourers working to install the new telegraph line. The first of many mentions of the new advancements comes from Al Swearingen. He demonstrates his fear for these controlling forces by declaring the telegraph poles bringers of “[i]nvisible messages from invisible sources, or what some people think of as progress.”⁴⁰ By denoting the poles as ‘progress’ the concept of epochal progression becomes explicit. The notion of movement into the industrial phase of development is furthered by the appearance of “stamp mills” on Alma Garrett’s gold claim.⁴¹ These machines of profit and labour coupled with the invisible control, which technology brings, results in the conclusion that Season two is concurrent with the second epoch of classical capitalism.

The second aspect that designates this season as being of the epoch of classical capitalism is the development of the ‘nation-state.’ Since *Deadwood* camp was in territory officially outside of the United States, it was in essence a tiny sovereign state. As a result of the ending of the Great Sioux War, the Black Hills territory was officially taken into the United States.⁴² We discover early on in the first episode of season two that the Hills have now been divided into three counties under Yankton’s control. Following this early declaration, the second season focuses on the process

⁴⁰ David Milch, ‘A Lie Agreed Upon Part 1,’ *Deadwood: Season Two*, director Ed Bianchi (HBO, 2005).

⁴¹ Elizabeth Sarnoff, ‘New Money,’ *Deadwood: Season Two*, director Steve Shill (HBO, 2005).

⁴² Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism From Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 365.

If Christ Was a Cowboy

of setting up the municipality in the context of a county and state, including all the backstabbing and bribing that this entails. Regardless of the longwinded nature of the process, what is depicted in this season is an actual town with a sheriff, a mayor, and eventually even municipal elections. This development into a realised civic institution further confirms the premise that season two is representative of the age of classical capitalism.

Seth Bullock: The Personification of the Protestant Ethic

Seth Bullock asserts himself as a disciple of Hickok through his interactions with Hickok and his emotional reaction to his death. His following of a man who sacrificed himself when interpreted through a Weberian lens leads to the conclusion that Bullock is representative of the Protestant ethic. In the same way that Jesus' death led to the religion of Christianity, the necessary antecedent to the Protestant Reformation, so too does Hickok's death lead to the rise of Bullock's Protestant ethic. Following this line of thought, the natural conclusion is that Bullock, with his Protestant ethic, continued Bill's work by further facilitating the rise of modern capitalism.

In season one, it is discovered that Bullock's nickname as a child was 'Sloth,' although by the midpoint of the season viewers would be strained to picture him ever indulging in such a sin. This shift is demonstrated in Bullock's throwaway line to his nephew regarding a fish that stays in the same place all day in the creek near the house that Bullock built for them. Bullock states, "Maybe after work we can make him pay for his slothful ways."⁴³ As such, Bullock's Protestant ethic is explicitly observable through his adherence to his works in the form of a worldly calling. He is a firm observer of the belief that a man's calling is "the highest form which the moral activity of the individual can assume."⁴⁴ This shall be demonstrated through analysis of Bullock's accepting of his worldly calling as sheriff of the camp.

In the final episode of season one, Bullock allows his emotions to run wild when he viciously beats Alma Garrett's father. This man, an affluent problem gambler from New York, has come to town with the intent of exploiting his daughter's newfound wealth to service his recent

⁴³ Sarnoff, 'New Money,' *Deadwood: Season Two* (HBO, 2005).

⁴⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 80.

gambling debts. Bullock's emotions run high when he becomes aware of Alma's father's intent, as he and Mrs Garret are having an affair. Minutes after Bullock executes this beating, he exacerbates the immoral nature of his action by informing Al Swearengen that, for the sake of the camp, it would be better that the man is taken care of rather than have him send in outside forces in search of restitution. Following the incident, and a talk with Sol Star about righting his wrongs, Bullock storms into Al's office and the following dialogue ensues:

Seth: Taking Mrs Garrett's father with 'em.

Al: Up and about so quick.

Seth: He's slung over a mule.

Al: Alive is my point. Dority give me to understand you'd just as soon as seen him dead.

Seth: If that man comes back to the camp, he'd be my problem to deal with.

Al: The way you and Hickok dealt with Ned Mason.

Seth: No. I'll be the fuckin' Sheriff.

Al: Startin' when?

Seth: Startin' now.

Al: You have the tin?

Seth: I do.

Al: Produce it. On the tit.

Seth: I know where it goes.

Al: *(raises a shot)* Huzzah.⁴⁵

From this point onwards Bullock serves his role to the upmost as sheriff as he takes his worldly calling as the highest moral order of a human life. In the same way that the Calvinists' acceptance of their calling aided the rise of modern capitalism, Bullock's acceptance of his calling as the law enforcer of the camp allows the development of municipal institutions, which in turn support the development of modern capitalism in the camp.

Bullock's adherence to the Protestant ethic is exacerbated by his complete acceptance of the responsibility of caring for his deceased brother's child and wife. By accepting them as his own, he rejects "all spontaneous enjoyments of life," in the form of his affair with Alma Garrett.⁴⁶ In episode two of the second series, he offers Mrs Garrett the

⁴⁵ David Milch and Ted Mann, 'Sold Under Sin,' *Deadwood: Season One*, director Davis Guggenheim (HBO, 2004).

⁴⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 58.

ultimatum of disengaging relations or leaving the camp as a couple. Mrs Garret, in her red aristocratic dress, is in this case the figure of desire and worldly pleasure. Bullock's eventual decision to reject her and what she represents to care for his nephew and his brother's widow marks the point at which Bullock accepts the Protestant ethic and turns his back on sin.

Through Bullock's adherence to his worldly calling, the rule of law begins to take hold in the camp. In turn, the rule of law, along with the other civic institutions, lays the foundation for the further development of modern capitalism. Expressed in a more Weberian way, Bullock's acceptance of his worldly calling, and the Protestant ethic, allows the institutions of classical capitalism to take hold.

The Monopoly Capitalist: Season Three

Season Three: The Age of 'Monopoly Capitalism'

In the third episode of season two, a new character arrives in the camp with a familiar face. Mr Wolcott, as an emissary of the mining giant George Hearst, represents an agent of radical change in the camp. This status is discerned by the fact that both the character of Wolcott and Jack McCall are played by the same actor, that being Garret Dillahunt. McCall was an agent of radical change by facilitating the sacrifice of Hickok and therefore unknowingly allowing modern capitalism to grow in the camp. Wolcott, on the other hand, is cruel, violent and wholly self-aware. In the same way that McCall was the agent that brought in the dawn of modern capitalism, Wolcott is the agent who brings the dawn of monopoly capitalism. His primary purpose in the camp is to accumulate as many gold claims as he possibly can to pave the way for the arrival of George Hearst. In essence, the role of the devil has passed from Al Swearengen to the agents of monopoly capitalism.

The beginning of the age of 'monopoly capitalism' is marked by the death of Bullock's boy, in the aptly named episode "Amalgamation and Capital." A horse in the thoroughfare tramples the boy while the residents are in awe of the first bicycle in the camp. The bicycle is representative of the advances of technology, which distract human attention away from the death of both their innocence and their future. From this point in the show, Hearst enters the camp and fundamentally alters the course of capitalistic development. His accumulation of various means of production coupled

with his heavy-handed tactics towards those who rise against him, characterise the season as the era of monopoly capitalism.

George Hearst: Weber's Pinnacle of the Spirit of Capitalism

The historical George Hearst made his fortune in Nevada through the extraction of silver ore. Rather than indulging in the worldly pleasures of whiskey and women, Hearst reinvested his capital into various pieces of infrastructure, which served to enhance the output of his claims.⁴⁷ He was rarely at home with his family and consistently sought further profit in any venture he could. His notable investments included newspapers, real estate and an assortment of stocks. In other terms, Hearst was a monopoly capitalist. He possessed the Spirit of Capitalism in the sense that he saw the accumulation of capital for capital's sake as the highest order of his life. The Hearst of the show, while having the spirit of capitalism, is divorced from the religious base that Weber ascribes to the spirit's development.⁴⁸ As such, Hearst, according to Weber, represents the highest development of the capitalist spirit and the age of monopoly capitalism as he engages in "the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning" to the extent that it becomes, "associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport."⁴⁹

To sufficiently discern Hearst's nature as being that of a monopoly capitalist, it is necessary to address two characteristics. The first must be that Hearst values accumulation of capital above all else, and the second is that he is divorced from any religiously based moral framework, by demonstrating that he will use any method to gain more wealth. Hearst's stature as a man who values capital above all else will be addressed first. What quickly becomes apparent from the way that Hearst lives in the camp is his rejection of worldly luxuries. His residence in the camp is a room in the local hotel, which he buys and then tears a hole in the wall as to allow him to observe the thoroughfare. While residing in this room, the only measure of comfort that he addresses is to install his own maid, Aunt Lou, as the hotel's new cook. Hearst shares a deep connection with Aunt Lou, which becomes apparent when he shares the following insight with her regarding why he is not home with his wife:

⁴⁷ Nasaw, *The Chief*, p. 6

⁴⁸ Newcomb, 'In the Beginning ... *Deadwood*,' p. 58.

⁴⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 182

If Christ Was a Cowboy

Hearst: Aw, she knows, she knows. She knows why I always leave so quickly. Goddamn truth is I'd rather be off by myself, Aunt Lou. Free to do my work...⁵⁰

What becomes apparent from this conversation is Hearst's desire to 'do his work,' which involves the accumulation of capital. He garners no pleasure from being with his family or purchasing material things, he simply desires to gain capital. As such, it can be said that Hearst values capital above all.

In Hearst's pursuit of unbridled capital, he allows no religiously-bound ethical system to slow him down. His actions towards workers, who dissent against him in the name of better pay or work conditions, are a startling indicator of this. In the first episode of season three, one of Hearst's Cornish workers is shot dead by Hearst's hired guns. The killing is made to look as if it was committed in self-defence, but both Bullock and Swearingen are convinced otherwise. Hearst's disregard for ethical systems is further demonstrated by his rigging of the camp's elections. In order to not let his interests be adversely affected by the "camp's retrogressive elements," Seth Bullock in particular, he proposes that Al Swearingen and the owner of his competing establishment assist in this process. Following Swearingen's refusal to comply, Hearst calls in favours from people in positions of political power, to get the military to vote in the election, in order to deny Bullock the office of sheriff.⁵¹ Hearst's willingness to use both violence and bribery to assist him in the accumulation of capital indicate that he is bound by no normative ethical system, religious or otherwise.

As demonstrated above, Hearst epitomises the 'spirit of capitalism,' as he values capital as the highest possible pursuit in the form of 'his work.' Regardless of his possession of this spirit, he is a man far removed from the industrious Calvinists of Europe. He abides by no ethical framework, religious or otherwise, in pursuit of wealth. Rather than expressing his morality through his worldly works, Hearst is a man who undertakes his works with a "character of sport."⁵² As such, it is apparent that Hearst represents those aspects of capitalism that many find

⁵⁰ Regina Corrado and Ted Mann, 'True Colours,' *Deadwood: Season Three*, director Gregg Fienberg (HBO, 2006).

⁵¹ Bernadette McNamara, 'The Catbird Seat,' *Deadwood: Season Three*, director Gregg Fienberg (HBO, 2006).

⁵² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 182.

repugnant.⁵³ Therefore, we can safely assert that Hearst is the personification of the age of ‘monopoly capitalism’ in the camp and, therefore, the highest development of Weber’s ‘spirit of capitalism.’

Conclusion

This article has attempted to utilise Weberian methodologies in order to make explicit the underlying themes of capitalist development present in *Deadwood*. In season one, we trace the ‘rosy dawn of capitalism’ in the form of the epoch of ‘primitive accumulation.’ By analysing Wild Bill Hickok as Weber’s Christ, it employed Weber’s schema regarding the role that the Protestant ethic played in the development of modern capitalism. This sacrifice links in with Hickok’s disciple, Seth Bullock. Bullock in turn embodies the Protestant ethic, which furthered the development of the era of ‘classical capitalism.’ Following this development, capitalism becomes stripped of any religious connection and the modes of production controlled by the few in the age of ‘monopoly capitalism.’ In the final scene of the series, Hearst rides away from the camp in an anti-climactic fashion. There is no definitive culmination, just a sense of mourning as control of the camp is now had by the monopoly capitalist. As Weber states, the accumulation of capital in this age then becomes an activity similar to sport.⁵⁴ This notion finds its personification in the figure of George Hearst.

It is possible that, as this article argues, David Milch was trying to paint a picture of the development of capitalism in the Western world in *Deadwood*, with Wild Bill Hickok’s spirit at its core. What, then, is the place of religion? Rather than suggesting that ‘rugged individualism’ is the religion of the Wild West, Milch emphasises the notion of Deadwood camp as a microcosm, with Christianity still the driving spirit. Yet to tell the story of the development of the Western world in the Wild West, the characteristics of this driving spirit required alteration to suit the historical era. It therefore seems that the series is not really about capitalism. It is simply the case that this particular theme has allowed the creator to set the action in a time and place of his choosing, that being the Wild West.

The conclusion of *Deadwood*, viewed through the lens of capitalist development, suggests that capitalism has reached a point devoid of

⁵³ Francis Ching-Wah Yip, *Capitalism as Religion? A Study of Paul Tillich’s Interpretation of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 13.

⁵⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 182.

If Christ Was a Cowboy

morality. Understanding *Deadwood* as a microcosm, it can thus be discerned that humanity has lost its fundamental morality. Yet the series does not idealise the past. Violence is present in all three seasons, but the message seems to be that the contemporary position where human development is synonymous with systems of material gain is where the true problem lies. The message David Milch conveys is thus, indeed, a negative one; the domination of the West by consumer capitalism is dismal. Nevertheless, the open-ended nature of the series' conclusion implies that there is a chance for restitution, a secular salvation.