The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Facebook: Updating Identity Economics

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Abstract

Scholars and news media generally name Facebook’s two central problems: that its data collection practices are a threat to user privacy, and that stricter regulations are required to prevent “bad actor” from spreading hate and disinformation. However separating these two concerns—personal data collection and bad actors—overlooks the way that one generates the other. First, this article builds on critical race scholarship to examine how identity politics are historically distorted and commodified into profitable vigilance and intolerance, in what I call a transition from identity politics, to personal identity economics. Facebook’s Ad Manager, for example, reveals how personal identities are itemized as advertising assets, which are cultivated through deeper, more trenchant identity politics. Second, this article theorizes about what makes such staunch, intolerant identity politics addictive. Drawing on Max Weber’s theories of the Protestant Ethic, this article explores how Facebook activism thrives on deep-rooted Christian paradigms of dogma, virtue, redemption, and piety. As dogmatic personal identity economics spread across the globe, they testify to how Facebook’s business model manufactures bad actors.

Keywords

identity politics, critical race theory, Protestant ethic, Max Weber
Virtues and sins are used here deliberately to invoke the Christian paradigm that fuels Western capitalism. In 1905, Max Weber launched modern sociology with his treatise, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” which argued that puritanical values propelled capitalist enterprise. Weber was writing 300 years after Calvinist asceticism, and he argued that it kicked off capitalism, thanks to doctrines of predestination, virtue, delayed gratification, and paranoia. Three centuries later, he recorded these ideas in the persisting belief that vocation, devotion, and individualistic ambition entitled one to financial wealth and success. His argument has held over the past century as lifestyle ad campaigns continue to prey on a sense of iniquity, virtue, vocation, entitlement, and salvation. However, modern social media platforms have perfected this ascetic propriety by injecting ranking logic into intimate personal online sociality. To take seriously Weber’s “spirit of capitalism,” the more that Facebook algorithms promote a vigilant sense of pious morality in the vein of 17th-century asceticism, the more they generate friction free capital flow.

The first two sections of this article will discuss “identity economics,” and how Facebook commodifies behavior and belief into an unprecedented granular calculation of the individual by walking through Facebook Ad Manager. The following section will draw on critical race scholars who chart the commodification of identity politics starting in the 1960s, which I extend into modern corporate social media business models. The next section builds the case that, guided by the lucrative legacy of Protestant social norms, Facebook algorithms rank virtue, piety, dogma, and intolerance—an argument complemented by social media scholarship on social media shame and compliance. In conclusion, just as puritanical Christianity propelled Western capitalism, Facebook’s powerful business model thrives on piety and extremism.

Commercial Space

Facebook’s crisis of data violations and destructive bad actors dominate headline news and guide legislative decisions. This narrative was central to Mark Zuckerberg’s 2018 congressional hearing about the Cambridge Analytica scandal and drove legislative measures like U.S. Senators Amy Klobuchar’s and Mike Warner’s 2017 bill, “The Honest Ads Act,” which requires Facebook advertisers to explicitly state their identity. The critique prompted the launch of the “Facebook Ad Archive,” in which Facebook discloses the most expensive ad campaigns related to American elections and other issues of national importance (“Ad Archive,” n.d.; “Klobuchar, Warner,” 2017). In July 2019, the Federal Trade Commission fined the company five billion dollars for its data privacy breaches.

However, the fear of data mining is a false flag. Critical media theorists discourage the mythology of “good” or “bad” big data. Data itself are not omniscient power or knowledge. Facebook data sets are insidious because of the range of management and classification they afford. These are based on hierarchies that are not new, but existing, traditional, and even ancient (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Haraway, 1983; Hoffman, 2017). The threat is not Facebook’s access to our data, but how it is ranked and deployed; how it shifts what we value about ourselves, and about each other.

To understand this ranking scheme, I adopt the term “identity economics,” coined by Nobel Prize winning economist George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton. Published at the millennium, their theories signaled economists’ renewed attention to the effects of group dynamics and belief. Akerlof and Kranton took seriously the irrational social factors that influence economic behavior, like duty, honor, or the self-destructive moniker of a “social smoker.” One decade later, political economist Shayo (2009) added to identity economics with the sordid case study that nationalism spreads rapidly among the poor, but, paradoxically, also reduces support for redistribution. Patriots frown on welfare, even though they live in disproportionate poverty. This was a major breakthrough: Shayo’s economic model earned the Wallerstein award for its significant contribution to political economics. Group beliefs, values, and dynamics were enshrined as lucrative features—at the same time as Facebook introduced “likes.”

Today these “likes” have morphed identity economics into outsized proportions. Akerlof, Kranton, and Shayo demonstrated their spread through turn-of-the-century examples such as televised campaign speeches, rap music, and workplace slogans that could be privately, discreetly consumed. Now, on ubiquitous platforms like Twitter and Facebook, “identity” is a public facing reputation and the stakes are high and irascible. Although Akerlof and Kranton wrote Identity Economics: How Our Identities Shape Our Work, Wages, and Well-Being for the consideration of economists, commercial advertisers and political campaigners, today, identity economics are a personal concern. Every day, social media users are aware of the capital gains and losses of each social media utterance. In an unprecedented way, even intimate gestures on social media enter a personal profit matrix.

What happens when individuals, like corporations, are rewarded for calculating their identity in terms of its economic value? Black, feminist, and postcolonial scholars trace the economization of identity to its Christian colonial roots, from the trafficking of human cargo during Transatlantic slavery to the ongoing commodification of civil rights movements (Spillers, 2003; Wynter, 2003). As Noble (2018) points out, racialized sexuality is a historically lucrative product. For marginalized communities, intimate gestures have always been ranked in terms of economic value, whether explosively or on personal terms. Now that Facebook has extended this ranking system on a global scale, marginalized social media users are both influential and vulnerable in a landscape that distills identity markers into a public ranking system of social capital.

Critical social media scholarship interrogates the impact of this new, personalized identity economics on group
dynamics—how it galvanizes more myopic voter constituents, spreads hate campaigns, or weaponizes shame (Chun, 2016; Tufekci, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Data collection is not what is at stake, but a new ritual of control that incentivizes fervid group dynamics for power and profit.

The Asset

To understand Facebook’s business model, I made a Facebook ad. I created a Facebook Page to access Facebook Manager, and then invested the minimum of $5 (per day for one day). First, I was asked to name my product, and then select my choice of marketing strategies. I chose “Conversions,” which means to get customers to take action, such as purchase an item, rather than, say, simply to view my ad and spread brand awareness. I was then guided to select my “Audience” from a drop-down menu titled, “Detailed Targeting.”

I was offered dizzying demographic detail. Under the sub-heading “Behaviors,” I selected “Politics” which offered categories like “People in the USA who are likely to engage with conservative political content.” I could select users with relationship statuses from “long-distance” to “new relationship” to “close friends of women with a birthday in 0–7 days.” I could see that this last category is an audience of precisely 61 and a half million. I could target “multicultural affinities,” like African American, Asian, or Hispanic.

I finally created a target audience of Asian grad students who use Gmail, are likely to engage with liberal political content related to: community issues, work at the University of Toronto, have dogs, are in new relationship, have close Muslim friends who celebrate Ramadan, as well as friends who have birthdays in the next 0–7 days, are early technology adopters (especially when its free) and use Chrome browsers on a MacOSX operating system.

I was describing myself, but amazingly learned that this audience selection is still “fairly broad,” with a potential size of 40 million. My online behavior, political attitudes, the kind of friends I have, the photos I upload, and my identity politics make me a clearer advertising target.

This is a glance at Facebook’s unparalleled asset: a literal commodification of identity. This commodification takes place on Facebook’s website, but also far beyond, because not only has Facebook bought and absorbed its competitors like Instagram and Whatsapp, its API extracts and collates data from the many third-party apps who use Facebook plugins—the irresistible addition that asks users to invite along their vast Facebook contacts. This ensures that Facebook’s protocols and rules of governance seep into thousands of corners of the Internet, spreading the “platformization of infrastructure” that extends Facebook’s reach with the same thrust as the other major Internet multinationals Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Helmond, 2018; Plantin et al., 2018). Facebook is not a single destination website, but an extensive scaffolding, an evolution of the “winner-take-all” business model that legislators scrambled to pin down during Zuckerberg’s 2018 hearing. Because of its reach, the platform triggers an ontological shift by commodifying who we are, what we are, and how we are. In this regard, calls for greater individual privacy reinforces discrete user identities that Facebook will gladly patrol.

Distinct, classifiable personal attributes are Facebook’s greatest assets. Soon after “Facebook” emerged to replace its elite university members-only site and users joined worldwide, CEO Mark Zuckerberg settled on the platform’s mandate: to build and keep close relationships. He told Wired that his goal was a massive real-world relationship flowchart. Unlike other social media platforms like MySpace, which allowed users to create fantasy identities and communities, he wanted to map out real-life “authentic” relationships in a “word-of-mouth engine.” “Rather than building new connections,” he explained, “what we are doing is just mapping them out,” as faithfully to the real world as possible (Vogelstein, 2007).

Word-of-mouth marketing is about more than communicating information, it is about establishing personal expertise for a sense of self-enhancement (Wojnicki & Godes, 2008). When a user promotes a product, which according to Ad Manager’s drop-down menu, could include multicultural affinities or liberal community issues, they are asserting their personal expertise on the subject. Activist issues are an especially valuable currency as a virtuous and meaningful sense of expertise and self-enhancement in line with group values. If this is the atmosphere that Zuckerberg aimed to foster, Facebook algorithms succeed in promoting competing expert declarations based on cultural allegiances, political judgments, and the rise of new and more virulent identity politics.

Identity Politics

With the emergence of social media, the commodification of personal beliefs has had such a dramatic impact on my identity politics that older activist mentors are often perplexed by what I call “activism.” Their identity politics emerged from 1960s and 1970s civil rights movements that rallied marginalized groups and demanded a revolutionary redistribution of material resources. But over time, this solidarity was gradually metabolized into the competitive, alienating logic of capitalist merchandise. Today Facebook creates an environment where our personal values and identities earn us visibility, power, popularity, and belonging to drive commercial and cultural supply and demand.

This descends from a long-standing capitalist appropriation of radical activist movements. Critical race and media scholar Stuart Hall depicts capitalism as a subversive state actor, gleefully defying establishment views in pursuit of new demand. While activists protest the status quo, capitalism
feels off of their disruption to design new products. As Marx predicted, dissent is no challenge to capitalism, but the creative force that fuels it (Hall, 1991, p. 29). Roderick A. Ferguson’s 2018 book *The Reorder of Things* builds on Hall’s analysis and depicts academia as a powerful case study of identity politics for sale. As Black activists led cultural transformation into the 1970s, so did the burgeoning neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, which elevated the influence of corporations to rival state actors. Powerful industries seized on the spreading influence and force of civil rights movements, converting them into market niches of commercial consumption, but also increasingly privatized agendas of cultural institutions, including universities. Ferguson’s ultimate thesis is that capital and then the State feed off of interdisciplinary programs like Black Studies and Feminist Studies to metabolize radical ideas back into corporate profit, domestic policies, and seductive civil service careers—alluring would-be activists with academic prestige, status, and stable jobs.

More than academia, social media is the ultimate example of this alchemy, from radical activism to commercial property. When Ferguson describes how the academy appropriated identity politics, it reads like a blueprint for Facebook’s business model:

> Modern subjects in the United States of the sixties and seventies would begin to learn to think of themselves in terms of their con–stitutive and historic differences of race, class, and gender and how those differences and histories accounted for present–day privileges and disfran–chisements. In ways that were unprecedented, racial, gender, and sexual existence could be reflected in and exposed simultaneously through polit–ical and epistemological existence. This new interdisciplinary biopower placed social differences in the realm of calculation and recalibrated power/ knowledge as an agent of social life. For the American academy, the Amer–ican state, and an Americanized capital in the sixties and seventies, the question would then become one of incorporating difference for the good rather than disruption of hegemony. (Ferguson, 2012, p. 34)

Ferguson underscores an American legacy that absorbs activist movements into a “realm of calculation” and carves deeper identity lines of class, race, and gender and the enticing promise of biopolitical privileges. Activists fighting for communal equity were seduced by university careers where social difference could become a source of authority and income.

My own activism culminated in a graphic novel that I published in 2014 called *100 Crushes*, 100 stories about the people who arouse and inspire me with their queer gender expressions and anti-racist activism. This project was born and raised on social media, compiling 6 years of comics that I had circulated through myspace and Facebook, along with my personal brand tagline: “celebrating the beauty of being neither straight nor white nor cisgendered.” Social media made me queer famous—not queer famous like Alison Bechdel, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the graphic novel *Fun Home*—but famous enough that she called herself my fan and wrote the introduction to my second book. This publicity alone earned me entrance into a competitive masters of fine arts for which I would be otherwise unqualified. It was also a factor cited in my acceptance to one of my country’s most prestigious PhDs. As I learned to refine my identity politics to harness ranking algorithms, my rising social media profile influenced university admission decisions and my artistic, publishing, and academic success.

In my example, social media outstrips and even guides academia’s power to distill social difference into material and social capital. Critical social media scholar Wendy Chun calls this “race and/as technology,” building on Hortense Spillers’ (2003) groundbreaking notion of “American grammar” to describe how ethnicity has been wielded since Transatlantic slavery for capitalist and state purposes as a unit of material and abstract resources:

> The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. (Spillers, 2003, p. 68)

More so than academia, Facebook parses and allocates this “value” into niche markets, training users to see their identities as branding exercises and social currency. My branding exercise means that my activist intentions are baked into personal marketing practices, based on conscious and unconscious observations of algorithmically promoted popularity, conformity, and compliance. Once they become such a commercial practice, these identity calculations no longer threaten hegemonic national identity. Critical race scholar Neferti Tadiar also takes up Spiller’s lens to illustrate how identity politics are digested back into tools of profit and domination:

> It is not just that something like an identity politics can and has been placed on the side of states: we see political strategies of radical social struggle made over into programs, sets of procedures for the civil service sector of global imperial democracy . . . When we do the critique that we do so well, do we not employ the grammar of the police? Of the slave trader and auctioneer? Of the entrepreneur and the investor? Do not we communicate and traffic in the particular colonial, capitalist, real abstract codes of social and subjective being that make up an American grammar? (Tadiar, 2016, p. 175)

Online activist movements can and have been powerful agents for civil rights demands and positive social change. But when they take place in a marketing landscape like Facebook, they are also ranked in a commercial hierarchy that generates niche markets, visibility, likeability, and social capital. As many users alter their speech and behavior in line with social media’s powerful rewards, activism has the potential to be distorted and radicalized as a form of capital gains.
The Spirit of Facebook

Personal identity economics are an exacting ranking system that blossom out of a residual Christian worldview. The North American work ethic can be summed up by the faith doctrine that prosperity is the right of hard working, dedicated, talented individuals. This is not grounded in reason, but the residues of the Christian story arc, which literary critic Northrop Frye (2006) reveals to be the foundation of most Western storytelling. It is the original happy ending: like the fall and rise of Adam and Eve, or Jesus’s Resurrection from the dead, the Christian story arc is the story of conflict, suffering, and a triumphant reunion with what was once lost. This trope echoes in Disney endings, lifestyle commercials, gym membership promises, and romantic songs. It is also the formula for a winning Facebook status update.

Two years ago, I won a prestigious award and I wanted my Facebook friends to know. I bought myself a bouquet of flowers just for Facebook, because after years of scrolling I know that the most popular updates are the ones that are declarative and photogenic. But my final touch was to emphasize that I was “the first queer person of colour to have won this award,” a statement that I believed, would travel far and accumulate likes. My story depicted rising above my struggles, taking the marginalized aspects of identity that my family and many other families consider to be deviant and unwanted, and turning it into a happy ending. This story arc is the building block of self-branding—the public facing story of humble beginnings and triumph over adversity.

Social media branding offers an addictive sense of mission, a chance to feel fulfilled, a means to be photogenically reborn every day. This is not a rational economic motivation, but an irrational faith in the power of our group to administer adamant callouts, vociferous renunciation, and wokeness absolutism. This Christian narrative is also deeply profitable. As I learn to expertly calculate and deploy my identity for group influence and popularity, I funnel myself right into “Liberal Asian American likely to engage with liberal political content.”

A century before Akerlof and Kranton formulated the link between identity and economics, Weber called a similar exercise “Christian sociology.” He observed that Protestant religions bred the most successful capitalist enterprises. Euro-Western capitalism has since adopted their spiritual beliefs as business common sense—beliefs that are not rational, but ethical, moral and emotional, grounded in piety and virtue.

Weber (2013) traces these moral imperatives back to the commercial success of “the spirit of the old Calvinism” 300 years before his time (p. 37). To offer a brutal summary of these imperatives, Martin Luther led the Protestant exit of the Catholic Church, condemning the Pope for selling “indulgences,” which allowed sinners to buy forgiveness and restore their passage to Heaven. To defy this corrupt practice, Protestants decreed that God alone, not human authority, could determine who deserved to be saved.

In the 17th century, the Calvinists took this a step further and declared that God’s chosen were strictly predetermined and that no amount of good works could change one’s fate. Instead, they searched for evidence of salvation through the proof of God in practical elegant efficiency. They believed that the power of frugal, smoothly run systems were testimonials to God’s design. After all, Weber repeats, the capitalist spirit is not unlimited greed, but the opposite: cautious, restrained, tempered, infinite renewal of profit:

The daily tasks [are] given by the lex naturae (natural law), and in the process this fulfilment assumes a peculiarly objective and impersonal character, that of service in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment. For the wonderfully purposeful organization and arrangement of this cosmos is, according both to the revelation of the Bible and to natural intuition, evidently designed by God to serve the utility of the human race. (p. 64)

Calvinists sought to prove their faith by fully adhering to prudential, painstaking capital management, which stimulated enormous gains. Long before the Taylorist productivity principles, Calvinism automated productivity that was predictable, efficient, hyper-individual, and alienated.

It was very alienated, Weber writes that to prove one’s faith in worldly activity, Calvinists renounced the sins of their neighbors with “a gulf which penetrated all social relations with its sharp brutality” (p. 75). The culture that fostered modern capitalism did so with such piety and paranoia that Weber imagined it to be a lonely and inhumane faith, preaching complete mistrust in all human beings, since God had chosen such a select, unknown few, and anyone might be tainted and damned. This cruel hierarchy of entitlement found fertile soil in the dehumanizing attitudes of the industrial revolution and Trans-Atlantic slavery:

This consciousness of divine grace of the elect and holy was accompanied by an attitude toward the sin of one’s neighbour, not of sympathetic understanding based on consciousness of one’s own weakness, but of hatred and contempt for him as an enemy of God bearing the signs of eternal damnation. (p. 75)

Capitalism proliferated more aggressively in the Euro-West than it had in its Chinese, Indian, or Babylonian manifestations, and its sway, argued Weber, emerged from its persisting, affecting convictions. By the time Weber studied Calvinism in 1905, capitalism was a firmly secular pursuit, but he identified its hold in the speeches of the founding fathers and the foundations of the American dream—that hard work leads to salvation. In fact, wrote Benjamin Franklin, because virtue promises profit, it is an acceptable front to put on for show.

According to Franklin, those virtues, like all others, are only in so far virtues as they are actually useful to the individual, and the surrogate of mere appearance is always sufficient when it accomplishes the end in view. (Weber, 2013, p. 18)
For this reason, writes Weber, American virtue seems superficial and even hypocritical to outsiders. If the mere appearance of virtue proficiently accomplishes its goal, then that is still socially admirable.

Puritanical virtue signaling persists on social media, as do the other Christian convictions of value and worth. Black Feminist scholars Tonia Sutherland (2017) and Noble (2018) argue that viral social media activism, like the circulation of videos of anti-Black police violence, is a futile social justice spectacle that does not actually challenge racist laws or policies. Facebook ranking systems are not activist tools, but lucrative marketing atmospheres of pious expertise and redemption.

As a marginalized artist, I was eager to exploit a new and virtuous public authority to access scarce resources, like jobs, speaking engagements or endorsements. It became apparent that an easy way to attract precious attention was to endorse group virtues and renounce perceived sins, fuelling the “callout culture” that ranks and establishes group expertise. My identity politics were funneled into Facebook’s word-of-mouth engine in the form of supply and demand.

The historic role of the Church is the administration and execution of restrictive, profitable population management. Before Calvinism, human ranking systems stimulated vast Church wealth for centuries. In fact in 1997, Pope John Paul II nominated St Isidore as the Patron Saint of the Internet—because he was responsible for the first ranking system in the seventh century (“The patron saint,” 2018). As the Prophet Mohammed’s reputation grew in the East, St Isidore composed an encyclopedic compendium of human “monstrosity” that still echoes in modern racial stereotypes. St Isidore designed an “Etymologiae” to convince Europeans that they alone were God’s chosen race (Tolan, 2002) classifying non-Christian humans into 12 categories of irredeemable monstrous sin. The first 10 were categories of disability, the 11th was intersex babies, and the 12th was all foreign races (Williams, 1996). This human ranking system became the backbone of ecclesiastical study and dispatched war, colonialism, and eventually Calvinist intolerance (Lim, 2018).

Renouncing Sin

Ancient Christians created a damning hierarchy of race, gender, and ability. Calvinists added a damning vector of wealth and poverty. The subsequent Christian story arc sets its protagonist on a heroic journey of redeeming prosperity, while in mortal fear of the social and material impoverishment of a damned reputation. In a secular, but fundamentally Christian society, striving for prosperity is profoundly interconnected to virtue and an unblemished reputation.

Platforms cultivate piety for profit, a compliance that Taina Bucher (2018) chillingly refers to as “Algorithmic Life.” Wendy Chun (2016) unpacks case studies of teenagers whose confessional videos, self-harm, and suicide prompt viral responses on Facebook, Youtube, and Reddit. Despite the fact that social media is inherently confessional, these videos are publicly fetishized or condemned according to what Chun calls the “epistemology of outing,” a practice of collective shaming. Interestingly, Chun shows how it is heightened by the target’s perceived failure to establish his or her brand, as in the case of Amanda Todd, whose failed Youtube singing career reinforced vitriolic and misogynist attacks on her as a “fake” or “attention whore.”

Bizarrely, these women’s actions are condemned most when they resonate with our machines’ operations: when they reveal the ways in which we’ve been commodified and sold, precisely at the moments when we think we are in private. Indeed, these actions and these videos intersect, buttress, and call into question the presumption of privacy, and thus the logic of outing so central to these videos. (p. 158)

The “epistemology of outing” is rooted in the Protestant ethic that commercial failure signals a lack of virtue and worth. The mass response to Todd’s videos misunderstands, or outright denies, the fact that algorithms determine popularity and visibility according to calculated economic factors. Instead, Todd’s bullies betray the epistemically Protestant moralizing of social media group dynamics.

Social network communities flourish around inflexible rules. Zeynep Tufekci (2018) emphasizes their irrationality: “We seek approval from our like-minded peers. This is why the various projects for fact-checking claims in the news, while valuable, don’t convince people. Belonging is stronger than facts.” Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018) expands on how this conformity fuels political power. Building on Philip Howard’s theory of “hypermedia,” he describes how audiences are targeted, segregated, and then galvanized, for example, by the 2016 Trump campaign, which exploited Facebook Ad Manager to discriminately promise American redemption:

Through hypermedia campaigns, governments in power are able to “manage” citizens. They can manipulate and precisely target flows of information or propaganda. There is no public or polis, only tribes that can be combined or divided depending on the needs of the moment. (p. 164)

Hypermedia discreetly divides members of the same household into segregated niche markets of specific ideological campaigns. These profitable silos are fortified by algorithms that rank and promote the most liked and popular statements within the group, cultivating their collective virtues and sins.

Computer scientist Philip Agre (1994) describes algorithms as a capture system for enforcing grammar rules:

once a grammar of action has been imposed on an activity, discrete units and individual episodes of activity are more readily identified, verified, counted, measured, compared, represented, rearranged, contracted for, and evaluated in terms of economic efficiency. (cited in Chun, p. 60)
Social network algorithms train users to adopt a collective piety that recalls Spillers’ “American grammar.” With the same fastidious method as Calvinism, social media algorithms seek to generate predictable, calculable, profitable units of activity. This commodification multiplies and amplifies its logic of marketing and commercial promotion. The resulting atmosphere breeds the paranoia and intolerance of hate rallies and nationalist movements that make headlines, but it also contributes to self-conscious performance of piety, purity, and renunciation. My personal identity economics came with a tradeoff, I became defined by who I hate. Millions like me coagulate into radical group dynamics and a banal daily fear of saying the wrong thing. The hostile cultural landscape that has emerged since 2004 is not the result of new bad actors, but of amplified storytelling—a lucrative business of good versus bad that looks less like the digital science fiction of Neuromancer and more like The Holy Crusades. Weber argued that understanding Western capitalism requires that we understand its Christian roots, from Calvinist industrialists to the centuries of Christian frameworks that they built upon. As violent polarity and xenophobia flourish across the globe, the impact of this worldview on social media—and our subsequent behavior—becomes more urgent to revisit, analyze, and defuse.

My conclusion is not original: Facebook must stop commodifying our personal lives. I join the chorus of demands that we stop paying with data, and replace it as some have suggested, with a monthly fee, donation, or public tax. But rather than concerns about malicious users or privacy, I am concerned about the legacy that spawns malicious users and a privacy fetish. That is an ancient dynamic that Facebook has serendipitously re-ignited. Centuries of colonial Christianity document how powerful interest groups amassed land and resources by cultivating piety: this is Facebook’s business model.

**Conclusion**

Facebook exploits identity politics as a marketable inventory of predictable audiences. Its ranking algorithms encourage personalized identity economics by promoting reverent insiders, shameful outsiders, canceled sinners, and woke redemption—because these are clear markers of customer preference. Social media is an increasingly mandatory public sphere that touches all personal, human interactions with the logic of marketing and commercial promotion. The resulting atmosphere breeds the paranoia and intolerance of hate rallies and nationalist movements that make headlines, but it also contributes to self-conscious performance of piety, purity, and renunciation. My personal identity economics came with a tradeoff, I became defined by who I hate. Millions like me coagulate into radical group dynamics and a banal daily fear of saying the wrong thing. The hostile cultural landscape that has emerged since 2004 is not the result of new bad actors, but of amplified storytelling—a lucrative business of good versus bad that looks less like the digital science fiction of Neuromancer and more like The Holy Crusades. Weber argued that understanding Western capitalism requires that we understand its Christian roots, from Calvinist industrialists to the centuries of Christian frameworks that they built upon. As violent polarity and xenophobia flourish across the globe, the impact of this worldview on social media—and our subsequent behavior—becomes more urgent to revisit, analyze, and defuse.

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