A Buddhist History of the West

Studies in Lack

David R. Loy

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Contents

	Acknowledgments	vii
	Introduction: Toward a Buddhist Perspective	1
One	The Lack of Freedom	17
Two	The Lack of Progress	41
Three	The Renaissance of Lack	65
Four	The Lack of Modernity	87
Five	The Lack of Civil Society	125
Six	Preparing for Something That Never Happens	171
Seven	The Religion of the Market	197
	Afterword: The Future of Lack	211
	Notes	217
	Bibliography	223
	Index	229

INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

> If one looks with a cold eye at the mess man has made of his history, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he has been afflicted by some built-in mental disorder which drives him towards self-destruction.
>
> —Arthur Koestler

If our sense of self is a construct, as Buddhism and contemporary psychology agree, it is also ungrounded. This book is about the ways we have tried to ground ourselves, to make ourselves feel more real. To be self-conscious is to experience our ungroundedness as a sense of *lack,* but what we are lacking has been understood differently in different historical periods. The chapters that follow show how our understanding of this *lack* changed at crucial historical junctures; in fact, these new understandings of *lack* seem to be why those junctures were so crucial in the development of the West.

Traditionally, religion is the main way we try to ground our ungroundedness. From such a lack perspective, then, the history of the West is not a story of gradual secularization, for we can never escape the burden of our lack and the need to transcend it. Rather, our history becomes a tale of the increasingly this-worldly ways we have attempted to resolve this lack. Since it is due to our ungroundedness, which is basically a spiritual problem, these attempts have for the most part been unsuccessful. In psychotherapeutic terms: we have unconsciously projected and objectified our lack by trying to ground ourselves somewhere *in*

the world. Our inability to do that means we continue to be haunted by our own shadow.

What makes this a *Buddhist* history of the West? Reduced to its essentials, Buddhism teaches that, if we want to be happy, our greed, ill will, and delusion must be transformed into their more positive counterparts: generosity, compassion, and wisdom. Is this true collectively as well as personally? The history of the West, like all histories, has been plagued by the consequences of greed, ill will, and delusion. The first two are obvious enough. What is emphasized in the pages that follow is the third: the largely unconscious ways that we have tried to resolve our lack—ways that have often led to greater suffering.

It must be emphasized at the outset that this book offers a Buddhist perspective, not *the* Buddhist perspective. It is one contemporary interpretation of Buddhist teachings that attempts to develop those teachings in a particular direction, in order to understand what they can mean for us today, in a world very different from Shakyamuni's. In accordance with its own emphasis on impermanence and essencelessness, Buddhism has been adaptable as it has disseminated to other places and cultures. To what, then, is Buddhism adapting today, as it infiltrates Western consciousness? Buddhist-Christian dialogue continues to be a fruitful interreligious encounter; others might point more facetiously to Hollywood's fascination with Tibetan Buddhism. Yet it is becoming clearer that Buddhism's main point of entry into Western culture is now Western psychology, especially psychotherapy.

This interaction is all the more interesting because psychoanalysis and most of its offspring remain marked by an antagonism to religion that is a legacy of the Enlightenment, which defined itself in opposition to myth and superstition. In spite of that—or because of it?—this interaction between Buddhism and Western psychology is an opportunity for comparison in the best sense, in which we do not merely wrench two things out of context to notice their similarities, but benefit from the different light that each casts upon the other. While contemporary psychology brings to this encounter a more sophisticated understanding of the ways we make ourselves unhappy, it seems to me that Buddhist teachings provide a deeper insight into the source of the problem.

What is that problem? For the most part "I" experience my sense-of-self as stable and persistent, apparently immortal; yet there is also awareness of my impermanence, the fact that "I" am growing older and will die. The tension between them is essentially the same one that confronted Shakyamuni himself, when, as the myth has it, he

ventured out of his father's palace to encounter for the first time an ill man, an aged man, and finally a corpse. Insofar as this problem often motivates the psychotherapeutic quest to understand ourselves and the meanings of our lives and our deaths, there is already a deep affinity between the two.

Most traditional religions resolve the contradiction by claiming that the soul is immortal. Buddhism does the opposite, not by simply accepting our mortality in the usual sense, but by offering a path that emphasizes realizing something hitherto unnoticed about the nature of that impermanence. Inasmuch as Western psychotherapeutics cope with our death fears not by denying death but by making us more aware of those fears and what they mean for our life, there is further affinity between the two. In psychological terms, both emphasize that what passes for normality (*samsara* in Buddhism) is a low-grade of psychopathology, unnoticed only because so common; that the supposedly autonomous ego-self is conditioned in ways we are normally not aware of (*karma, samskaras*); and that greater awareness of our mental processes can free us (*samadhi, prajna*).

The crucial link between the two traditions is the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, "no-self." *Anatta* is essential to Buddhism, but to make sense of it we need to relate it to another concept: *dukkha*, usually translated as "suffering," better understood more broadly as frustration or unhappiness. The four ennobling truths into which Shakyamuni often summarized his teachings focus on this: life as *dukkha*, the cause of that *dukkha*, the end of *dukkha*, and the path to end *dukkha*. It is no exaggeration to say that this is the most important concept in Buddhism. On more than one occasion, the Buddha said that he taught only one thing: how to end *dukkha*.

Although psychotherapy today has more specific insight into the dynamics of our mental *dukkha* (repression, transference, etc.), I believe that Buddhism points more directly at the root of the problem: not dread of death, finally—that fear still keeps the feared thing at a distance by projecting it into the future —but the more immediate and terrifying (because quite valid) suspicion each of us has that *"I" am not real right now.* No-self implies a subtle yet significant distinction between fear of death and fear of the void—that is, terror of our own groundlessness, which we become aware of as a sense of lack and which motivates our compulsive but usually futile attempts to ground ourselves in one way or another, according to the opportunities for self-grounding that our particular situations seem to provide. In short, our

lack represents the link between *dukkha* (our inability to be happy) and *anatta* (our lack of self).

Although Shakyamuni Buddha did not use psychoanalytic terms, our understanding of the Buddhist denial of self can benefit from the concept of repression and what Freud called the return of the repressed in symbolic form. If something (a mental wish, according to Freud) makes me uncomfortable and I do not want to cope with it consciously, I can choose to ignore or "forget" it. This allows me to concentrate on something else, yet what has been repressed tends to return to consciousness. What is not willingly admitted into awareness irrupts in obsessive ways—symptoms—that affect consciousness with precisely those qualities it strives to exclude. Existential psychologists such as Ernest Becker and Irvin Yalom argue that our primary repression is not sexual desires, as Freud believed, but the awareness that we are going to die. *Anatta* implies a slightly different perspective.

Buddhism analyzes the sense-of-self into sets of impersonal mental and physical processes, whose interaction creates the illusion of self-consciousness—i.e., that consciousness is the attribute of a self. The death-repression emphasized by existential psychology transforms the Oedipal complex into what Norman Brown calls an Oedipal *project*: the attempt to become father of oneself, that is, one's own origin. The child wants to conquer death by becoming the creator and sustainer of his/her own life. Buddhism shows us how to shift the emphasis: the Oedipal project is the attempt of the developing sense-of-self to attain autonomy, to become like Rene Descartes's supposedly self-sufficient consciousness. It is the quest to deny one's groundlessness by becoming one's own ground: the ground (socially conditioned yet nonetheless illusory) I "know" as being an independent self.

Then the Oedipal project derives from our uncomfortable, repressed awareness that self-consciousness is not "self-existing" (*svabhava*) but ungrounded, because a mental construct. Consciousness is like the surface of the sea, dependent on unfathomed depths that it cannot grasp because it is a manifestation of them. The problem arises when this conditioned consciousness wants to ground itself—i.e., to make itself *real*. Since the sense-of-self "inside" is an always unfinished, never secure construct, its efforts to real-ize itself are attempts to objectify itself in some fashion in the world. The ego-self is this never-ending project to realize oneself by objectifying oneself, something consciousness can no more do than a hand can grasp itself, or an eye see itself.

The consequence of this perpetual failure is that the sense-of-self is shadowed by a sense-of-lack, which it always tries to escape. The

return of the repressed in the distorted form of a symptom shows us how to link this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world. We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that "there is something wrong with me," but that feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways. In its "purer" forms lack appears as what might be called an ontological guilt or anxiety that gnaws on one's very core. For that reason ontological guilt tends to become guilt for something, because then we know how to atone for it; and anxiety is eager to objectify into fear of something, because we know how defend ourselves against particular feared things.

The problem with all objectifications, however, is that no object can ever satisfy if it is not really an object that we want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we think we want is only a symptom of something else (according to Buddhism, our desire to become real, which is essentially a spiritual yearning)—we end up compulsive. According to Nietzsche, someone who follows the Biblical admonition literally and plucks out his own eye does not kill his sensuality, for "it lives on in an uncanny vampire form and torments him in repulsive disguises." Yet the opposite is also true: insofar as we think we have escaped such a spiritual drive we are deceiving ourselves, for that drive (to escape our lack and become real) still lives on in uncanny secular forms that obsess us because we do not understand what motivates them.

Then the neurotic's anguish and despair are not the result of symptoms but their source. Those symptoms are necessary to shield him or her from the tragedies that the rest of us are better at repressing: death, meaninglessness, groundlessness. "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation [i.e., lack]; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive" (Becker 1973, 66). If the autonomy of self-consciousness is a delusion that can never quite shake off its shadow feeling that "something is wrong with me," it will need to rationalize that sense of inadequacy somehow.

This shifts our focus from the terror of future annihilation to the anguish of a groundlessness experienced here and now. On this account, even fear of death and desire for immortality symbolize something else: they become symptomatic of our vague intuition that the ego-self is not a hard core of consciousness but a mental construction, the axis of a web spun to hide the void. Those whose constructions are badly damaged, the insane, are uncomfortable to be with because they remind us of that fact.

In more Buddhist terms, the ego-self is delusive because, like everything else, it is an impermanent manifestation of interdependent phenomena, yet it feels alienated from that interconditionality. The basic difficulty is that insofar as I feel separate (i.e., an autonomous, self-existing consciousness) I also feel uncomfortable, because an illusory sense of separateness is inevitably insecure. It is this inescapable trace of nothingness in my "empty" (because not really self-existing) sense-of-self that is experienced as a sense-of-lack. In reaction, the sense-of-self becomes preoccupied with trying to make itself self-existing, in one way or another.

According to Otto Rank, contemporary man is neurotic because he suffers from a consciousness of sin just as much as premodern man did, but without believing in the religious conception of sin, which leaves us without a means to expiate our sense of guilt. Why do we need to feel guilty, and accept suffering, sickness, and death as condign punishment? What role does that guilt play in determining the meaning of our lives? "The ultimate problem is not guilt but the incapacity to live. The illusion of guilt is necessary for an animal that cannot enjoy life, in order to organize a life of nonenjoyment" (Brown 240). Even a feeling of wrongdoing gives us some sense of control over our own destinies, because an explanation has been provided for our sense of lack. We need to project our lack onto something, because only in that way can we get a handle on it.

In contrast to the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism does not reify the sense of lack into an original sin, although our problems with attachment and ignorance are historically conditioned. Shakyamuni Buddha declared that he was not interested in the metaphysical issue of origins and emphasized that he had one thing only to teach: how to end *dukkha*. This suggests that Buddhism is best understood as a way to resolve our sense of lack. Since there was no primeval offense and no divine expulsion from the Garden, our situation turns out to be paradoxical: our worst problem is the deeply repressed fear that our groundlessness/no-thing-ness is a problem. When I stop trying to fill up that hole at my core by vindicating or real-izing myself in some symbolic way, something happens to it—and therefore to me.

This is easy to misunderstand, for the letting go that is necessary is not something consciousness can simply do. The ego cannot absolve its own lack because the ego is the other side of that lack. When ontological guilt is experienced more "purely"—as the unobjectified feeling that "something is wrong with me"—there seems to be no way to cope with it, so

normally we become conscious of it as the neurotic guilt of "not being good enough" in this or that particular way. One way to describe the Buddhist path is that the guilt expended in these situations is converted back into ontological guilt, and that guilt endured without evasion; the method for doing this is simply awareness, which meditation cultivates. Letting go of the mental devices that sustain my self-esteem, "I" become more vulnerable. Such guilt, experienced in or rather as the core of one's being, cannot be resolved by the ego-self; there is nothing one can do with it except be conscious of it and bear it and let it burn itself out, like a fire that exhausts its fuel, which in this case is the sense-of-self. If we cultivate the ability to dwell as it, then ontological guilt, finding nothing else to be guilty for, consumes the sense-of-self and thereby itself too.

From this Buddhist perspective, our most problematic duality is not life against death but self versus nonself, or being versus nonbeing. As in psychotherapy, the Buddhist response to such bipolar dualisms involves recognizing the side that has been denied. If death is what the sense-of-self fears, the solution is for the sense-of-self to die. If it is nothing-ness (the repressed intuition that, rather than being autonomous and self-existent, the "I" is a construct) I am afraid of, the best way to resolve that fear is to become nothing. The thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen (1985, 70) sums up this process in a well-known passage from *Genjo-koan*:

> To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.

"Forgetting" ourselves is how we lose our sense of separation and realize that we are not other than the world. Meditation is learning how to become nothing by learning to forget the sense-of-self, which happens when I become absorbed into my meditation exercise. If the sense-of-self is an effect of self-reflection—of consciousness attempting to grasp itself—such meditation practice makes sense as an exercise in *de-reflection*. Consciousness unlearns trying to grasp itself, real-ize itself, objectify itself. Liberating awareness occurs when the usually automatized reflexivity of consciousness ceases, which is experienced as a letting go and falling into the void. "Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the

Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real dharma" (Huang-po 41). Then, when I no longer strive to make myself real through things, I find myself "actualized" by them, says Dogen.

This process implies that what we fear as nothingness is not really nothingness, for that is the perspective of a sense-of-self anxious about losing its grip on itself. According to Buddhism, letting go of myself into that no-thing-ness leads to something else: when consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become no-thing, and discover that I am everything—or, more precisely, that I can be anything. With that conflation, the no-thing at my core is transformed from a sense-of-lack into a serenity that is imperturbable because there is nothing to be perturbed.

This Buddhist account of the sense-of-self's sense of lack (developed at greater length in *Lack and Transcendence*) provides a psychological and existential explanation of the self-built mental disorder that Koestler noticed. If that gives us insight into the individual human condition, can it also shed light on the collective dynamics of societies and nations? If, as Nietzsche puts it somewhere, madness is rare in individuals but the rule in groups, peoples, and ages, does our history demonstrate a group dynamic of lack?

This issue is explored in the chapters that follow. To appreciate the argument, it is important to keep in mind that such an understanding of lack straddles our usual distinction between sacred and secular. The difference between them is reduced to where we look to resolve our sense of lack. If that lack is a constant, and if religion is understood as the way we try to resolve it, we can never escape a religious interpretation of the world. Our basic problem is spiritual inasmuch as the sense-of-self's lack of being compels it to seek being one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, whether in overtly religious ways or in "secular" ones. What today we understand as secular projects are sometimes just as symptomatic of this spiritual need. Rather than reductionistically viewing the sacred as a deluded projection of the secular, this book argues that many of our modern worldly values acquire their compulsiveness, and many modern institutions their authority, from this misdirected spiritual drive. Our lack is a constant, but how we understand it and how we try to overcome it have varied greatly throughout history. We need to look at the ways our personal senses of lack have plugged into the collective unconscious of our social behavior and institutions. We shall see that trying to resolve our sense-of-lack collectively has compounded the problem, and that such compounded lack objectifications have often assumed a life of their own.

The first chapter, The Lack of Freedom, looks at the Western ideal of freedom as it originated in classical Greece and Rome. This value has become so deeply involved in how we understand ourselves that it is hard for us to look *at* it, yet this ideal is not something "natural": it has its own history. Why did the idea of freedom arise when and where it did? This chapter argues that making freedom into our paramount value is more problematic than we have realized, for freedom conceived in secular, humanistic terms is fatally flawed. As the intellectual history of the classical period shows, it does not and cannot give us what we seek from it.

A lack perspective has two important implications for the way we view freedom. First, any culture that emphasizes the individuality of the self will inevitably come to place highest value on the freedom of that self. So it is not surprising that the Western history of freedom has been strongly associated with the development of the self, or, to put it another way, with subject-object dualism. Insofar as freedom is understood as freedom from outside control, we discriminate between internal (that which wants to be free) and external (what one is freed from). But that dualism is delusive, according to Buddhism, and one of the main sources of our *dukkha*.

Moreover, if the self-existence and autonomy of such a self is an illusion, then such a self will never be able to experience itself as enough of a self—that is, it can never feel free *enough*. It will try to resolve its lack by expanding the sphere of its freedom, which can never become large enough to be satisfactory. The history of the Stoic tradition culminates in the realization that such freedom cannot bring personal fulfillment or even peace of mind. The psychic introversion encouraged in Hellenistic philosophy broadened the sphere of one's subjectivity, but identifying that freedom with reason provided no way to cope with the increased sense of lack shadowing it. Freedom understood in such secular terms proved to be insufficient. This set the historical stage for return to a more explicitly religious perspective: the Augustinian discovery/construction of sin. Christianity offered a more attractive way to understand our lack.

Chapter 2, The Lack of Progress, traces both the dynamism of the West and the authority of its law back to the Papal Reformation, which occurred in Europe in the eleventh century. Although most of us know little about it, this was arguably the most important revolution the West

ever experienced, and it was incontrovertibly a *spiritual* one, not so much because it transformed the Papacy, but because it involved a radically new understanding of our human condition and its salvation. It was based upon a novel theological doctrine about what sin is and how we can be redeemed—in other words, a new explanation for our human lack and how that is to be resolved. This led to a bifurcation of the world into the sacred and the secular spheres, whose disengagement led to "a release of energy and creativity analogous to a process of nuclear fission" (Berman 88). For better and worse, this was the crucial turning point that shifted us from focusing on an other-worldly solution to the problem of life, to constructing a this-worldly one.

The development of canon law led to a new view of sin, before understood simply as a condition of alienation from God. Sin came to be defined in legalistic terms, as specific acts and thoughts, for which painful penalties must be paid either in this life or in the next. This was an important shift from the earlier meaning of penance—acts of contrition symbolizing a turning away from sin back to God and neighbor—into a more objectified sense of sin as an entity that, as the Church soon discovered, could be commodified. In my Buddhist terms, this was a novel way to understand what our lack consists of and how it is to be resolved. The elaborate system of payments for spiritual debts implied a new type of grip on one's ultimate destiny. It also plugged nicely into the reform of this world: "progress" was born.

> The most important consequence of the Papal Revolution was that it introduced into Western history the experience of revolution itself. In contrast to the older view of secular history as a process of decay, there was introduced a dynamic quality, a sense of progress in time, a belief in the reformation of the world. No longer was it assumed that "temporal life" must inevitably deteriorate until the Last Judgment. On the contrary, it was now assumed—for the first time—that progress could be made in this world toward achieving some of the preconditions for salvation in the next. (Berman 118)

The third chapter, The Renaissance of Lack, addresses some of the changes that occurred around the time of the Renaissance. It argues that three particular types of delusive craving, which today we take for granted as natural, are in fact historically conditioned ways of trying to resolve our lack: the desire for fame, the love of romantic love, and the money complex. These three tendencies are not bound

to any particular time or place, of course, yet in the West they became especially important as Christianity began to decline. As long as there was a truly catholic church providing a socially agreed method to cope with lack, such projects were not spiritually necessary and did not become obsessive. The stronger sense-of-self that began to develop in the Renaissance was shadowed by a stronger sense of lack, leading to greater individual need to real-ize this self and more radical attempts to do so.

The pursuit of fame and money are attempts to realize oneself through symbols; romantic love tries to fill in one's lack of being with the being of the beloved. All three are individualistic in that as they attempt a more personal solution to our lack, and all are secular insofar as they seek a salvation in the affairs of this world, but nonetheless religious in that they are still motivated by the spiritual desire to ground oneself and become real. Since they cannot fulfill that need, they threaten to spin out of control and become demonic.

In most Western societies belief in an afterlife has been largely replaced by a craving for fame, as an alternative way to become more real. Since the real world for us has become what's in the newspapers or on television, to be unknown is to be nothing. Because our sense-of-self is internalized through social conditioning, the natural tendency is to cope with our shadow sense of unreality by continually reassuring ourselves with the attention of other people, and the more attention the better. But if fame is my project to end my lack, disappointment is inevitable: no amount of fame can satisfy me when there is really something else I seek from it.

Another "personal religion" widely accepted today as a way to overcome our sense of lack, and also historically conditioned, is romantic love. When we fall in love (Madame de Stael called it "self-love *a deux*"), our formless sense of lack projects itself onto a particular lacked person, which provides us with a project to gain the lacked thing. Now I know what is wrong with me: I do not have *her* (or *him*). Originally the romantic myth had strong spiritual overtones, but for us it survives mostly in our preoccupation with sex. Why has sex become so obessive for so many today? If we do not dualize secular from sacred, we can see the same "spiritual" urge: we want sex to fulfill us and heal us—that is, we want it to resolve our lack, but that is something it cannot do except for the briefest of moments.

Money is perhaps our strangest social construction: a socially agreed symbol worthless in itself, yet one that has more value than anything else because it is how we define value. The psychological problem with

this approach occurs when life becomes motivated by the desire for such pure value, owing to an ironic reversal between means and ends: everything else is devalued in order to maximize a "worthless" goal, because our lack has become fetishized into that symbol. Today the most popular explanation for our lack—our contemporary original sin—is that we don't have enough money. This leads to a need for constant growth: an ever higher "standard of living" and the gospel of sustained economic "development."

These constitute a defective myth because they can provide no real expiation of lack. Today our temple is the stock market, and our rite of worship is communing with the Dow Jones average. In return we receive the kiss of profits and the promise of more, yet there is no atonement in this. Of course, since we have lost belief in sin we no longer see anything to atone for, which means we end up unconsciously atoning in the only way we know, by working hard to acquire all those things that society tells us are important—and then we cannot understand why they do not make us happy, why they do not resolve our sense that something is lacking in our lives.

Chapter 4, The Lack of Modernity, supplements the above account of our individualistic idolatries with a lack history of our institutional idolatries: the nation-state, corporate capitalism, and mechanistic science, all of them born out of the religious chaos of the sixteenth century. From a lack perspective, there seems to have been something compulsive and delusive about the development of these institutions, because it was motivated by a profound social anxiety—a collective sense of lack—which became aggravated in that century and then channeled into these directions.

In the sixteenth century the organic paradigm of a hierarchical cosmos created by God collapsed, along with the worldview and institutions that maintained it. This crisis was initiated by the Protestant Reformation, which led to a new understanding of our lack and eventually to new secular ways of handling it. Luther and Calvin eliminated the intricate web of mediation between God and this world that had constituted, in effect, the sacral dimension of this world. On the one hand, God was booted upstairs, far above the sordid affairs of this world; and on the other hand the principle of a direct and personal relationship with God became sanctified. Religion became privatized.

Without a truly catholic church to take the role of God's Vicar, who would assume the mantle of His authority on earth? The void became filled by charismatic rulers of the developing nation-states with

their chartered corporations, assisted by new technologies and philosophies. Together they responded to the anxiety and groundlessness of the age by embarking on a new project, which today remains our project: to compensate for our lack of spiritual grounding by collectively grounding ourselves. From a lack perspective, however, "God" is still present in the functioning of the nation-state, the market economy, and the Enlightenment scientific/technological project, because these collectivities continue to be motivated by what might be described as *institutional* lack. The history of the nation-states system demonstrates that they are unstable, externally competitive and internally self-aggrandizing. Economically, GNP is never big enough, corporations are never profitable enough, and consumers never consume enough. And the same is true for our scientific and technological establishments: the Faustian problem is not that we do not yet know enough, but that we never can, since our functionalist perspective subordinates their knowledge to our drive for ever greater control over the world.

Each is a victory of means over ends. The objectification of our lack into impersonal "secular" institutions means that basic questions about the meaning of our lives—the central spiritual issue for a being that needs to understand and resolve its own sense of lack—have become alienated into a "not yet enough" that can never be enough. For all three, power has become an end in itself, which is why there is something demonic about each of them. Power, although it may be a good servant, is a bad master because you can never have enough power if power itself is the goal. That points to the basic nihilism of modernity: the lack of an overtly spiritual grounding to our lives means that this "secular" preoccupation has become compulsive. Because this compulsion is not understood by us, these institutions have taken on lives of their own that subordinate us to them while avoiding subordination to anything else.

Chapter 5, The Lack of Civil Society, offers a lack perspective on the origins and development of civil society. Rather than being another result of the supposed secularization that began in the sixteenth century, Anglo-American civil society originated as a movement to reform society in order to make it more religious. This led to the execution of Charles I and Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth—a radical transformation possible only because it was understood as helping to fulfill Biblical prophecy about the return of Christ.

The legacy of those millennial expectations, and the ways those hopes transformed when frustrated by the failure of the Commonwealth, were essential for the development of civil society in England

and the United States (where civil society first developed). Far from being a secular alternative to Christian conceptions of political life, the new society that began to develop in the seventeenth century would have been literally unthinkable without its Christian presuppositions. Thomas Hobbes's state of nature is a secularized version of Calvin's "natural man" without God. Socialist critiques of private property originated in allegorical interpretations of Adam's Fall and God's curse upon him. Locke's theory of individual rights is rooted in a Protestant understanding of man's relationship with God. And the unique civic society of the United States evolved in large part out of Puritan millennialist ambitions to create another Holy Commonwealth in a new, still pristine promised land.

The important point is not simply that Anglo-American civil society has theological origins; our society remains theological in the sense that its values and institutions cannot help being based upon some ultimate view about our human nature—in my terms, about the nature of our lack and how that is to be overcome. Seventeenth-century discussions of the Bible produced the basic alternatives we still debate today in more secularized terms: Is human nature evil, in need of restraint? Or does an oppressive society deform our natural goodness? If we want to escape the stultifying standoff between them, we need to return to the basic existential issues and rethink them afresh. In order to know what to do socially about our sense of lack, we need to come to some social understanding of what it is and what causes it.

Then do the spiritual origins of Anglo-American civil society survive today as roots still necessary for its nourishment? Perhaps we cannot understand the development of our civil society without seeing how its current crisis is related to the atrophy of those roots. If so, our secular cynicism may need to recover some of the Puritans' idealism about working together to reduce the objectifications of lack that now endanger our world.

Chapter 6, Waiting for Something That Never Happens, takes a closer look at what might be called the means/ends problem in modern life: the way that contemporary culture has become so preoccupied with means that it loses ends. More precisely, they have become inverted: our means, because they never culminate in an ends, in effect have come to constitute our ends. It begins by considering what Max Weber wrote about the instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalitat*) of the modern world, and, in reaction to that, our flights into hypertrophied subjectivity—

more private, innerworldly responses to the world's bureaucratization, which do not escape the problem but aggravate it. Weber focused on three such spheres whose nonrationality seems to offer us a personal relief from the world's inexorable rationalization: an absolute ethics of "brotherliness," aestheticism, and eroticism. Rather than providing an innerworldly salvation, however, each aggravates the problem it flees, for the deceptive possibility of a private escape encourages us to yield to the degradation of the public realm, which in turn further encourages the escapist hypertrophy of subjectivist culture.

The other figure who thought deeply about means/ends teleology was Georg Simmel, whose *Philosophy of Money* reflects on the inevitability by which such a perfect means becomes *the* end: "Money's value as a *means* increases with its *value* as a means right up to the point at which it is valid as an absolute value and the consciousness of purpose in it comes to an end" (Simmel, 232). But this is only part of a more fundamental paradox that characterizes all developing cultures, according to Simmel. The cultural forms that life produces to express and realize itself become objectified into cages for the life-force that created them but needs to transcend them. Lengthening teleological chains lead us to ask about *the* end, the ultimate purpose of life, in that way producing our modernist awareness of a split between them.

A lack approach provides the crucial link between Weber's dualism (instrumental rationality versus hypertrophied subjectivity) and Simmel's ramifying teleological chains that never reach their end. If the modern, more subjectified ego-self is a delusion whose lack is never satisfied, it will understand its dissatisfaction as caused by having failed to attain its goals, which generates a need to develop more ambitious goals, at the end of still longer teleological chains. . . .

The final chapter, The Religion of the Market, gathers together many earlier threads in arguing that the predominant religion of the modern world, in fact the most successful religion of all time—making more converts more quickly than any other belief system or value system in history—is our present economic system. From a religious perspective, the global victory of market capitalism is not inevitable but only one historically conditioned way of organizing (or reorganizing) the material world; it also implies a worldview, with an ontology and ethics, in competition with other understandings of what the world is and how we should live in it. Previous chapters present lack interpretations of the origins of the money complex and corporate capitalism, but a

critical stage in their development occurred late in the eighteenth century, when new technologies led to the "liberation" of a critical mass of land, labor, and capital. Without denying the many ways we have benefited from this, we should remember that at the time it was experienced by most people as an unprecedented catastrophe that destroyed their communities—a catastrophe that continues today in much of the "developing" world.

From a lack perspective, the problem with market capitalism is twofold: greed and delusion. Desire for profit fuels it, and an insatiable desire to consume ever more must be generated to create markets for what can be produced. From a religious perspective, this greed is based on a delusion: the belief that happiness is to be found in this way, that this will resolve our lack. For Buddhism, in contrast, such desires are not the solution but a main source of the *dukkha* frustration that infects our daily lives.

As this suggests, lack as a category of historical interpretation does not aspire to be value neutral in the sense of making dispassionate "objective" claims. Our past is much too important to us for that. The Pali Buddhist term *dukkha,* along with the English words *greed, ill will* and *delusion,* are value laden, for that is what enables them to point to the increasingly obvious situation that, as increasing social problems in the "developed" world suggest, consumerism is unable to bring about the social happiness it promises. If that is so—and it is becoming increasingly difficult to deny it—don't we need to consider other ways to address our sense of lack?

ONE

THE LACK OF FREEDOM

> You have only to consider yourself free to feel yourself bound;
> you have only to consider yourself bound to feel free.
>
> —Goethe

The growth of freedom has been the central theme of history, Lord Acton believed, because it represents God's plan for humanity. One does not need such a Whiggish view of history to notice that the history of the West, at least, has indeed been a story of the development of freedom, whether actualized or idealized. We trace the origins of Western civilization back to the Greek "emancipation" of reason from myth. Since the Renaissance, there has been a progressive emphasis, first on religious freedom (the Reformation), then political freedom (the English, American, French revolutions), followed by economic freedom (the class struggle), colonial freedom (independence movements), racial freedom (civil rights), psychological freedom (psychotherapy frees us from neuroses), and most recently gender equality and sexual freedom (feminism and gay rights emancipate women and sexual "deviance"). Today deconstruction and other postmodern intellectual developments free us from authorial intention and the strictures of the text itself—what might be called "textual liberation."

So it is no surprise that freedom today is the paramount value of the Western world, and through the West's influence it has become that