

Black Friday: Pilgrimage in a Capitalist Culture

While the most recognized forms of pilgrimage are religious in nature, there are many secular forms, such as Star Trek conventions, visits to Jim Morrison's Grave, and journeys to a statue of Tito.¹ In these cases, all the components of a successful pilgrimage, infrastructural support, contestation, and intentionality, are present. In addition, people visiting these sites feel that they have been transformed, either socially, spiritually, or psychologically, by the experience. However, the most interesting form of pilgrimage is a combination of the religious and secular types of pilgrimage, revolving around a secular event and place that has been sacralized, such as the American retail holiday of Black Friday.

After the Industrial Revolution, Thanksgiving came to mark the beginning of the holiday shopping season in the United States. The day after Thanksgiving, a day dubbed "Black Friday" starting in the 1960s, a name ironically appropriated from a stock-market panic that occurred in the Fall of 1846, is a celebration of this economic boom time. Stores, especially large, corporate establishments and department stores, open early the morning with the hope of showing a profit in their balance books for the first time in the year (Fletcher). In order to leave the red ink for the black, stores throw enormous sales in an effort to draw in hundreds of thousands of customers for one day of extreme spending and, hopefully, large profits. The holiday had become so important to retailers in the early nineteenth century that, in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving to an earlier date in order to extend the shopping season. During the 1990s, it became the unofficial retail holiday and biggest shopping day of the year. Currently, Black Friday and the weekend after Thanksgiving account for around \$40 billion dollars in sales (Fletcher). While this event could be seen as just another secular holiday, the migration of people coupled with the transformation of these individuals through the process of participation has sacralized the event and transformed it into a pilgrimage.

According to a Maritz Poll taken in 2007, the pilgrims of Black Friday represent about 37% of the American consumer base and come from all socio-economic brackets and generations. According to the Maritz poll, "Those with household incomes of \$100,000 or more will shop at significantly higher (45%) on Black Friday than those in the lowest income group of less than 25,000 (30%)" (Maritz Poll). In terms of age, the majority of pilgrims (59%) are members of the Millennial cohort (mid-1970s to early 2000s). The second largest group comes from the Generation X cohort (1960s and 1970s) and accounts for 46% of the Black Friday pilgrims. These two generations comprise a significant portion of the American workforce and, presumably, have a greater percentage of their incomes available for spending. The older generations, specifically the Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation (1925-1945), make up a much smaller portion of the pilgrims, 44% (combined), which is understandable considering, most of them are retired and do not have a steady flow of income to spend on luxury and prestige goods.

In order to accommodate the some 134 million people, this pilgrimage has multiple destination points that are spread out across the country in such a way as to make sure every pilgrim can complete their journey while still being in the company of other pilgrims as the crowded conditions are crucial for the success of the rite (Fletcher). These commercial meccas take the form of large corporately-owned box stores, such as Walmart, Macy's, and Target, and massive mall developments. In general, these locations are located far from the large urban centers and are raised high above the interlacing stretches of highway on man-made hills of earth and concrete. In addition, the storefronts sport large, lighted signs that can be seen from the road, drawing people up to the summit. While people can visit and shop at these locations any day of the year, Black

For additional information on these pilgrimages refer to the articles by Porter, Margry, and Belaj (listed in references section).

Friday is the day for which the developments were designed and whose crowds determine any changes in the existing structure.

The success of destinations like these depends on strong infrastructural support with the capability to expand or improve as needed. Vast networks of multi-lane roads are required to not only bring people to the location but also ensure a degree of efficiency as people in the American culture cannot waste time stalled on heavily trafficked roadways. Furthermore, these roads require large signs to guide the travelers and well marked lanes and control mechanisms, such as speed limits and traffic lights, to provide some safety for the people and their vehicles. All of these infrastructural components and their maintenance are dependent on a stable, relatively-centralize political system and, ostensibly, a capitalism economy, which promotes the construction of large mall complexes, which, in turn, lobbies for stronger infrastructural support.

As the infrastructure around these points strengthens, more pilgrims venture to them on Black Friday, which leads to the expansion of the commercial areas in a cycle of exponential growth. In years where the infrastructure does not quite meet the needs of the pilgrims, contestation increases significantly and can led to incidents that will change the regulations of the pilgrimage and alter the face of the commercial landscape. For example, in 2008, a Walmart employee, in Long Island, New York, was trampled to death by a stampede of early morning shoppers as he tried to unlock the front doors (CNN). This type of violent death during the pilgrimage is not uncommon; however, after incidents such as this, changes have to be made both to the schedule of sales and store openings and to the procedures for allowing people into the stores. Inside of the stores, there is only more contestation as pilgrims compete for the best items and prices. In accordance with the spirit of capitalism, people literally fight over the desired items that will bring them prestige. In some ways, the degree of danger involved in the Black Friday pilgrimage makes the completion of the journey so prestigious as many refuse to venture out to the malls on the sacred day for fear of the crowds.

The third most important component of a pilgrimage is the intentionality of the pilgrims. For the intrepid pilgrim of Black Friday, intentions are two-fold. Firstly, transformation of the individual participants must occur by completion of the trek. Secondly, the pilgrimage must be restorative or beneficial to society and the culture as a whole. By striving to benefit both themselves and their society, pilgrims achieve the correct mindset and intentionality required.

Expounding on this two-fold truth of intentionality, for a pilgrimage to be a success on the individual level, the pilgrims must pass through a rite of passage in order to transform their identity and status. According to Arnold van Gennep, in his book *The Rites of Passage*, there are three states involved in this process of transformation: the pre-liminal, the liminal, and the post-liminal (van Gennep 21). These stages were later expounded upon by symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner, who later became known for his work on the subject of liminality and rites of passage. According to Turner, in the first stage, also known as the separation phase, the participant is detached and isolated from his/her group and relinquishes his/her current status with the expectation of passing into a new one through the completion of the ritual. In the second phase, the liminal state, the individual is floating in between statuses as he/she is now completely removed from society and its concerns, but has not yet reached his/her transformed state. In this phase, the individual's attributes and characteristics are ambiguous and ever-changing. In the final stage, also called the reintegration phase, the individual assumes his/her new status, psychologically and materially, and re-enters his/her group and society. Pilgrims must pass through these stages, reaching a new status through transformation in order to be victorious in their pilgrimage (Turner 80-81).

Early on the morning of Black Friday, an individual leaves his/her family group, sometimes accompanied by another member of the family, and sets forth in a car, truck, or SUV for one of the commercial meccas. Not only is the drive usually long and filled with

reckless drivers, the parking lots outside of the stores are true places of peril. Pilgrims must circle around the lots, weaving intricate designs, all the while paying attention to the movements of other pilgrims in order to find a spot for their vehicle. Dangers on this step of the journey include, getting hit by a car, hitting a fellow pilgrim, and running out of gas in the endless search for a parking spot. Once parked, the pilgrim exits their vehicle and begins to cross the blacktop lot on foot, facing even more danger. As the pilgrim approaches the threshold of the sacred space, he/she must join the line of fellow pilgrims. Here, the individual must truly detach his/herself from status and identity and join the faceless mob, removing all traces of his/her socio-economic standing. Some pilgrims have been waiting at the doors for hours, having dedicated an entire night to sleeping in a tent outside of the storefront, beginning their separation stage a few hours before the now-arriving pilgrims.

When the doors of the store finally open, around five in the morning, the next stage, liminality, consumes the pilgrim mob. In the context of the Black Friday pilgrimage, the liminal phase takes the form brutal competition and, often times, hostility. Pilgrims race through the store to find the desired relics that will bring about their transformation. These goods include, but are not limited to, designer brand clothes and accessories, advanced electronics, and the newest appliances. In this state, everyone is on an equal playing field with the same motivations and objectives. They are all searching and claiming, showing their ambition and ability to compete.

Because the prices cuts are so extreme, these usually high-priced status symbols are available to those in the lower socio-economic brackets, allowing for a transformation in social standing in the post-liminal stage. By owning status symbols, like an Apple iPod or Gucci handbag, a pilgrim can appear to the rest of society to have a higher income. While, their income and class will remain the same, owning the items of the higher classes makes them feel more confident and secure in public. Furthermore, the ownership of these items places the individual in better standing or status within their own socio-economic group and can elicit the envy of their fellows.² In a capitalist culture, all of these outcomes are incredibly beneficial to the individual and marks him/her as a successful member of society. Most importantly, these pilgrims bring their relic-like status symbols back to their households, conveying their transformed status to their family members as well through the ritual exchange of gifts.

In addition to the personal transformative value of Black Friday as a pilgrimage, the second component of intentionality, the societal transformation, must be fulfilled. To members of America's extremely capitalist culture, the economy and its markets become a god-like entity. The ups and downs of the markets can affect an individual's entire life, so it becomes important to appease this economic deity. By going on the Black Friday pilgrimage, pilgrims offer as a sacrifice a portion of their year's harvest to it. Their offerings boost the economy, keep their lives stable, and could potentially bring them economic success in the future, by way of tax cuts or other windfalls. Every year, pilgrims venture out from their homes with their expendable income to worship the god of capitalism, hoping to not just receive a transformed social status but also greater expendable income in the coming year. In this way, the pilgrimage of Black Friday, which follows on the heels of the national holiday Thanksgiving, is, in itself, a ritual of thanksgiving.

As the pace of life quickens and the economy slows, people have started looking other ways to change their status, specifically, through the consumption of luxury goods. As a result, Black Friday has moved to the internet. With an overall annual decline in the number of shoppers, many mall developments have seen the closure of many box stores as the corporations struggle to maintain profit margins by closing the less popular store

² For more information of the class/status divide consult B  teille's article on the class/status divide (listed in references).

locations (Kawai). While some pilgrimage destinations are being deconstructed, others are being refortified against further economic backslides. Thus, as pilgrims choose to journey to the destinations with the greatest variety of stores, they slowly alter the sacred landscape. It seems that this pilgrimage may come to end in the next few years as people stop traveling to the stores and as the stores begin to leave the commercial centers.

While some may argue that there cannot be an instance of secular pilgrimage, despite the many examples of just such rituals, Black Friday's legitimacy cannot be debated as it is arguably religious in nature. The higher power this rite gives thanks to is not a god or supernatural being; instead, it is the ever-variable market economy that determines the well-being and lifestyle of the people who are a part of it. Each November, these subjects of capitalism offer a piece of their monetary harvest to the market in order to ensure their future economic security. In this journey to the commercial centers of the nation, pilgrims endure hardships and find transformation through a three-stage rite of passage. They return home with new social statuses and bestow them upon their family members through gift-exchange. Once a holiday solely of commerce and exchange, Black Friday has become a sacred day and legitimate pilgrimage ritual.

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