

Are You a Capitalist?

I don't think so, protest though some might. In order to answer that question we have to fully understand what capitalism actually is. We routinely think of it as a scientific system of exchange whose origins are traced to Adam Smith, commonly thought of as the “father of modern economics” but who thought of himself as an 18th century Enlightenment philosopher of ethics and morals, as did his contemporaries like his good friend David Hume. With the publication of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* we began the modern era of continuous prosperity, so the thinking goes, brought to us by the power of free markets. And we believe that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, socialism/communism, its mirror image and only competitor, has been vanquished, proven false and relegated to the dustbin of history, suitable now only to demonstrate the veracity of capitalism.

See there: particular private property is the only way to achieve freedom and order.

Collectivity is demonstrably tyrannical.

Progress belongs to the victorious.

Many may think that capitalism is complicated, that the now global interplay of finance, goods and services, resources, labor and people is knowable only to the very best and the very brightest. It is the *capitalists* who proffer this complexity, and this belief, to their distinct advantage, enabling them to prosper in a surely dynamic world. But *capitalism* is actually very simple, so simple in fact that its essence lies hidden among the growing heap of models and data, policies and politics, lobbying, laws and regulations, and endless news stories about jobs, the economy and life in all its true complexity.

Capitalism is the progeny of the separation of Capital from Labor. That's all.

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What then is Capital? Capital is a construct, a posit, an idea, a made-up entity that we have agreed to collectively imagine. *Capitalism* is the worshiping of that idea, of that postulate. Capital is a pure product of the imagination that breathes singular life into the inanimate, into money—or more properly, representations of money. Capital is accounting entries come to life. Capital cannot just be, instead it must move, it must be invested and therein lays the mystery and power of our imaginary creation. Capital has a *telos*: it has its own mission and goal. It must compound, infinitely. Reproduction is its single attribute and as such its ends and means are the same. In practice it creates all necessary structures to ease its reproductive path. Woe to any manager who fails to achieve returns to Capital—to grow his Capital. Such neglect of his ward will bring a flock of suitors who promise to better care for this petulant figment of our presently collective imagination.

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Capitalism is immensely powerful. All would agree that it has shaped our world from our cultures and institutions to our environment, globally. When Capital comes to a field, the field changes; when Capital comes to a neighborhood, the neighborhood changes—likewise when capital leaves...

Wherever Capital goes change follows—its *telos* is always felt.

We have to stand in awe of its power.

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Capital is amoral—not immoral—though what it does may often be so construed, it doesn’t have any sense of itself whatsoever. It is innocent, as one might be of a crime by reason of insanity. But we have given it the right to exist in the world—it has become deeply embedded in our culture and in our language. And we cotton to it by giving it inalienable rights and privileges. Moreover it is said when Capital is free we are free. We even write books about it proclaiming how essential its free existence is to our free existence. Capitalism and Freedom, argues Milton

Friedman, is best thought of as an eternal bond. So our world is richer for our creation; we have plants and animals, rivers, mountains, oceans and insects...humans and Capital. Of all these Capital is the most powerful.

It stands next to God as a pure being.

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Whoever can lay hands on Capital wields a measure of its power—and those who best fully grasp and identify with its essence find immense power. Many have thought that we can fertilize and grow the common good with its *telos*—in fact harnessing the power of money is the liberal political agenda. But as we have seen, such agendas have been crushed in recent history—thirty years for starters—though we can trace a timeline going back much farther. Capital is too wily a beast—its single property too powerfully simple. Even the Best Samaritans who agree to Capital's liberation find their work Sisyphean. Whether they work towards charitable or environmental ends, every time they get their rock up the hill it rolls back down on them.

War, poverty, inequality and environmental destruction carry on as before.

And they turn again to beg of this amoral entity more means towards their just ends.

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By splitting the labor/capital atom we have put in place an increasingly furious chain reaction, only now becoming fully visible. It is an unleashing of power which only a few can control and it should not be surprising that it is those few who reap the rewards.

Who then among us would claim filial affinity to this insatiably rapacious simplicity? Who would claim their sole mission in life, their teleology, is to multiply without rest and without end?

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Whoever Holds Kinship Holds Power

We have to ask, and then observe, who best among us grasps the teleology of capital? Here think of an athlete: the aggressive sprinter possessed of solid thigh muscles, the marathon runner patient, sinewy and lean. We know them and their attributes, both mental and physical enable their excellence in their chosen sport. What then can we say of capitalists? To the extent they are driven to unfettered reproduction they are close kin to capital—they share its single and simple attribute. The very best are unencumbered by strings of morality and social convention—ideally they would have no strings at all. Again, it's not that capitalist athletes are immoral, but rather amoral, naturally exhibiting the properties of their profession. They are single-minded. We wouldn't expect a sprinter to be distracted by some mishap in the stands and nor should we expect a capitalist to be distracted by the amount of carbon in the atmosphere or the destruction of the middle class, let alone *the suffering poor*.

Thus we must observe that the capitalist sees the world as Capital sees the world: as a reductionist in pursuit of reproduction. Hawk-eyed and simple. Nothing can be denied access to its productive capability and anything can be created in its service. Mountains moved, rivers reversed, technologies produced, ideas, cultures, governments and peoples created and destroyed.

All in the service of its teleology.

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The instrument of the capitalist is price, the common denominator within which economists tell us, is found all the information we need to know. Telling! Capitalists are the Grand Simplifiers who parse and parcel according to the efficiency of price to enable themselves the most profitable reproductive reassembly. Theirs is the re-creative power of God.

Since the process is the same the results look the same, the world over. And so within our bio-diverse and complex world we see a spreading homogeneity, begun as development, and then heralded as progress, now a torrent of scorched earth and blacktopped banality whose purpose reflects the purpose of its creator. Globally.

Capital cannot abide diversity.

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The power of the Grand Simplifier has surpassed that of the Grand Inquisitor for he is the ultimate arbiter, able to put to death and eliminate anything that cannot be made productive. His power is not limited to saviors and sinners but includes all entities, from flora and fauna to social relations and people and geographies, technologies, jobs and ideas. Is it then any wonder that ardent capitalists exhibit such infallible confidence?

Just as the Grand Inquisitor offers his flock a circumscribed world of imaginary freedom, so too does the Grand Simplifier circumscribe the world in imaginary freedom. Increasing productivity and growth sit at the right and left hand of this father and these are solemnly good, *apriori*. He keeps all within the orbit of His arms, within the flow of markets, which encompass all that needs to be known about the world.

His teleology becomes culture: the endless production and consumption of goods and services. The word "goods" well chosen for it is an adjective masquerading as a noun—thus any material possession is good—it is a tempting tautology. The use value of goods and services are by their nature limited—how much of anything can any person use? And so something had to be done to overcome this contradiction of His essence. Through the transubstantiation of advertizing, use value becomes comparatively meaningless, replaced by symbolic values, thus exciting endless exchange; perpetual creation and destruction, in true manifestation of His essence.

Ideally the flock ceases to exist as persons. Infatuated with symbols people become consumers, whose servitude and debt in pursuit of symbols are born-again as virtuous work and honorable obligation, and most of all, as illusory happiness, they become trapped in Capital's aspirational web.

Production is the master; consumption the servant.

There are no other possible worlds, we are assured; it is, after all, science we are told. Capital exists.

We have no choice but to acquiesce.

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And indeed we find all the religions of the world complicit in this comparatively new creed, hostage to and fearful of its power. Knowing their flocks are dependent, so too they are dependant. Just revolt remains remote; their past history of questioning science has not worked out well, so they remain quiet minding their own business: the carting over to another world in which it is not clear whether Capital exists or not.

Perhaps they should ask.

Miraculously, periodic objections swell defiantly and sometimes with great hope in the face of the amoral tide. Stop! There must be some limits. Such entreaties come from many and varied quarters but all objections become subsumed, however well plotted or passionate they may be. Even major reforms leave in place the ontological entity, Capital, that then begins to attract its human kin—the *pleonexic*—who begins again the quest for eternal reproduction and growth; a remaking of the world in Capital's own image.

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So I ask again: Are you a capitalist? And my hope is that you are not. My hope is that your essence is not the essence of cancer cells and that your complexity dazzles me even if some of your attributes unsettle me. We can exchange goods and services. And we might even use a proxy for value—though we don't have to. But there is no reason to grant that proxy independent corporeal existence. And to imbue Capital with rights, with freedom, is the chimerical delusion of those most kin to Capital—the psychopaths. There is no reason to name that into existence and set it loose on the world. It can be mine, and it can be yours. But capital can't live outside of us, disembodied, lest it attract those least like us, and we all suffer and serve the tyranny of its simplicity and perish within its contagion of its life-crushing homogeneity.

Capital threatens our planet and us.

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I'm betting you're no kin to Capital, that you have known the warmth and love of your friends and family, and the peace of satiety. It is my fondest wish that be so.

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