

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

*Please join us for a discussion of capitalism (and other thoughts).
We will meet in Gamble 205 on Friday, Sept. 14th at 3:00 pm.*

Should Economics Determine Our Personal Identities?

By Chris Buckner

Many people are unaware to what degree personal identities in the United States are based on economics. The economic system used in the U.S. is called capitalism and it is credited as the reason for our country's success as well as for the success of other democratic societies around the world. Certainly economics is useful for distributing resources, but should it also be the main determining factor that shapes our consciousness?

Benjamin R. Barber states in his book, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, that "McWorld advocates will argue that the 'market' does 'serve' individuals by empowering them to 'choose' but the choice is always about which items to buy and consume, never about *whether* to buy and consume anything at all; or about the right to earn an income that makes consumption possible; or about how to regulate and contain consumption so that it does not swallow up other larger public goods that

cannot be advanced in the absence of democratic public institutions" (Barber 98). Today almost every aspect of American self-identity is tied to capitalism.

This did not happen on its own. In 1931 the White House issued a report concerning children's place in consumerism and concluded that "Through such [consumer] experiences personality develops...[These] experiences have the advantage also of creating in the child a sense of personal as well as family pride in ownership, and eventually teaching him that his personality can be expressed through things" (Robbins 25).

Today consumerism has almost total control of our lives and how we express ourselves. It is where we live, where we shop, the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the bodies we alter, sports, health, our vices, and everything else that we purchase to show the world who we really want them to believe we are on the inside.

For many years philosophers have struggled to figure out what should be the basis for constructing self-identities and still we, by each act of consumption, unquestionably agree it should be capitalism.

Examining who the winners and losers are in capitalism is revealing.

The Winners

(The 20% who have 84% of the wealth)

What does it mean to be a winner in a capitalist society? It means to have lots of capital. So who has the capital? According to Professor G. William Domhoff of the University of California at Santa Cruz the top 20% of the nation's citizens, those Marx would call the bourgeoisie, maintain roughly 84% of the nation's total wealth. They also own about 89% of corporate stock. Who are the top 20%? They are the business leaders (this includes every type of business even healthcare), high level politicians, entertainers and many others that champion capitalism (mostly white males).

The Losers

(The 80% who share 16% of the wealth)

There are many losers in capitalism. They are made up of the other 80% of our citizens that share the other 16% of the nation's total wealth and the remaining shares of corporate stock (Domhoff). These losers include the middle class though

the middle class is not likely to consider themselves losers in America. They remain content with the little financial power they possess and see themselves as much better off than the two groups below them—the lower class and those in poverty.

The lower class can best be described as those living paycheck to paycheck with little to spend on luxuries that tend to define the middle class. They work and do their best to just get by. Many of those in poverty also work, yet they tend to work in jobs that do not pay a living wage, offer little or no benefits, and provide little chance of upward mobility. Of those in poverty the majority are women: “despite the efforts of feminist movements, women in the core still suffer disproportionately, leading to what sociologists refer to as the ‘feminization of poverty,’ where two out of every three poor adults are women” (Robbins 354). This is understandable when you consider women’s work is typically valued less which is evident considering the disparity in wages.

We must now take into account the “forced” unemployed. Capitalism works on the principle that some people must be unemployed and therefore barely subsist or lack what is necessary to survive. Although many economists disagree on what the best percentage of unemployment is, “many Wall Street analysts argue unemployment levels should not dip below 6 percent, lest the economy risk a new era of inflation” (Rifkin 10),

economists do still agree that there should be unemployment to maintain a healthy economy. Currently, 1.38 million people are part of the required unemployed. Do we, the employed middle class who value a healthy economy, care that our economic system requires approximately 1.38 million people to remain unemployed for the system to work?

The Losers Outside of America

The losers of American capitalism no longer reside only in America. Capitalism’s influence has become global. Many American corporations have moved their manufacturing facilities to developing nations where they are able to find cheap labor, extremely loose labor laws, and little or no environmental regulations. According to Richard Robbins “Workers in these countries face the same problems of low wages and unsafe working conditions that workers in the Pennsylvania coal fields of the nineteenth century faced” (Robbins 353). A lot of the products made by these workers are for the American middle class to consume. Does our consumption require others outside of America to accept capitalism and enter into the poverty class?

Capitalism?

With so few winners and so very many losers, how is capitalism considered the best system for American society or,

for that matter, any society? With every purchase, we blindly approve of a system that rewards the rich and exploits the poor in this country and abroad.

Thought on Capitalism

“The capitalist system makes it very much easier for people not to realize what they are doing, not to know about the danger and hardship, the despair and humiliation, that their way of life implies for others.”

--Edmund Wilson,

The Shores of Light

Works Cited

Barber Benjamin R. *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping The World*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996.

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Rifkin, Jeremy. *The End of Work*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2004.

Robbins, Richard H. *Global Problems and The Culture of Capitalism*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.

If you have any questions, criticisms, comments or are interested in writing a thoughtful article for *The Philosopher’s Stone*, please contact Dr. Nordenhaug.

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