

Humans but inhuman: The Humanism of Capitalism

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Introduction

What is the difference between our identity as humans and our identity as animals? Undeniable we are first animals and then humans thus we call ourselves rational animals. But how do we differentiate ourselves as rational animals from other animals that are irrational? This can be seen in no other medium than how we coordinate ourselves on a daily basis. Our behavior should correspond with our identity as rational animals. Thus when I behave irrationally my actions is in conflict with my identity. The very purpose of this work is to explore the key area where humans as rational animals are constantly in conflict with our identity and how to mitigate this conflict.

Living as Humans

Man has untangled many hidden mysteries of the world but the greatest mystery yet to be unveiled is the mystery of his own self. He can govern the world but can hardly govern himself. A look at the history of humanity unfolds that the greatest threat to the future of humans is neither sickness nor diseases of any kind, nor any natural phenomena but war orchestrated by man himself. The population of people that have died at the hands of war starting from antiquity will probably surpass the current number of people inhabiting in this planet today.

The core excuse for this could be the apocryphal argument offered by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* that humans in their natural state are brutal. Thus humans have a natural tendency to dominate and rule the other. This directly succumbs to homo homini lupus - a war of all against all.¹ A counter argument we find in J. Locke who maintained that our natural state is not a brutalistic one but a state of equality where mutual relationship is the order of the day.²

Meanwhile, while the account of T. Hobbes practically speaking is the order of life highly exemplified in World War II where millions of lives were lost, J. Locke's account is an ought theory of how our human relationship ought to be. Following Hobbes account the future of human generation cannot be preserved because a war of all against all can probably result to a doom to all. Ultimately, the best remedy to ensure the preservation of humankind is the formulation of the society.

In the society, the search for the best way to live continues. From individual to individual, community to community, and national to international, how best can

¹ T. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, 177.

² J. LOCKE, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter II, Sect. 5.

we behave to differentiate our relationship with our fellow humans from our relationship with other existing beings? In other words, what should be the appropriate behavior expected from any being sharing the human identity especially to his fellow human being. The outcome is the prohibition of those actions that are seen as contrary to human identity.

Exactly what are these actions that showcase us as humans endowed with intellect and will? In response to this, philosophers have intervened. According to Martin Buber, human to human relationship he denoted as I-Thou relationship where we treat the other person not for our own personal benefit.³ According to I. Kant, the other person should be treated as an end in itself and not as a means to our own end.⁴ Summed up by Hobbes, he maintained: “Nevertheless it is not prudence that distinguisheth man from beast. There be beasts, that at a year old observe more, and pursue that which is for their good, more prudently, than a child can do at ten”.⁵ Theretofore, our human identity is not only portrayed in the possession of human entities but in living a life worthy of humans.

From today’s perspective, are our behaviors as humans how it ought to be? Are all humans irrespective of diversities such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, religion etc. living a life worthy of human identity? Are we not treating ourselves not as means to actualize our personal goals? If yes, (which I suppose is not the case) then there is no need for this work. However, if no (which this work presupposes) then our next task in this work is to pinpoint the main factor behind the anti-humanism of humans and going further to explore how human identity can once more be exalted.

Economy: The Biggest Threat to Humanism

Economy constitutes one of the basic parts of life because the basic needs of life mostly fall under the economic sector. This is not to a reduction of all human needs to economy but the fact that majority of the core human needs are economically oriented. Basic needs here make reference to those needs that are fundamental for life such as food, water, and air. Though as humans we have many other vital needs but those can be referred to as secondary needs which even without their existence life may still continue. Looking at the primary needs, whereas air which arguably is the most vital is provided without cost by nature, food and water must be sought after thus establishing them as the epicenter of economy.

Moving further, the reality of man having different economic needs besides the basic needs can trigger the conclusion that economy serves as the biggest reason

³ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 68.

⁴ I. KANT, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 19.

⁵ T. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, 30.

for humans to cordially relate with each other. Paradoxically, the opposite may still be true that economy can as well serve as the biggest motivating factor why humans are not relating as humans. In the former argument the scaffold of this conclusion rests on the imperfection of humans especially economically.

The humanistic arm of economy can be illustrated by considering the case of a farmer that specializes in growing food. He will also need clothes, shoes, shelter under his head, medications when s/he is sick and so on. All these s/he will certainly not be able to provide for the self without the help of another. Thus establishing a good rapport with his fellow human being becomes a prerequisite towards the satisfaction of those needs beyond his or her reach.

In the other hand, economy poses the greatest threat to humanism because all humans cannot have as much resources as they so desire leading to competition for these limited resources. The clear vindication of this is the fight among individuals, communities and nations over a territory of land on the basis that it is more fertile than the rest. To unveil the extent economy have marred humanism, it is not illogical to maintain that economy based conflicts among individuals in some cases escalates to communities, national and religious conflicts thus resulting to civic, religious and international wars where hundreds and thousands of lives are sacrificed.

According to Karl Marx, economy is the most fundamental approach to clearly comprehend the evolution of human history: “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles”.⁶ In his *Man Against Mass Society*, G. Marcel elaborates on how man alienates his fellow men for the purpose of his own well-being and happiness found in material possessions. Materialistic mentality drives man against his own society; his own people and even family.⁷ Summed up in his *Being and Having*, Marcel avows: “...our possessions swallow us up...”⁸

The Capitalistic Economy

As already seen, economy can serve as a two-edge sword to promote humanism and vice versa. However, just as humanism is important, poverty reduction cannot be sacrificed. In view of these, two different types of economic system were postulated and categorized as belonging to only one side of the coin. Departing from the humanistic aspect of economy, socialism has gained enormous support. However, capitalism has traditionally been ascribed to the anti-humanistic terrain of economy because of its exaltation of poverty reduction and wealth acquisition.

Unlike capitalism, socialism tends to mitigate the competition between people for natural resources by exterminating private ownership of resources. All

⁶ K. MARX, *The Communist Manifesto*, 3.

⁷ G. MARCEL, *Man Against Mass Society*, 55.

⁸ G. MARCEL, *Being and Having*, 152.

resources are managed by the universal authority and the products from these resources are evenly distributed to all. In this context, it is impossible to find a billionaire in socialist society.⁹ The biggest cause for anti-humanism which is the fight for limited resources is put at rest. On the other hand, capitalism allows private ownership of resources by perceiving competition among individuals as the motivating factor towards wealth production. In this context humanism ceases to be the priority.

By permitting competition, capitalism created rooms for individuals' freedom and self-interest. Individuals are free to pursue their own good without external pressure. Free market system and freedom of consumption were the next outcomes. Thus the role of the government was limited to the protection of its citizens and orchestrating a conducive environment for market activities.¹⁰

From the above features of capitalism, it is easy to conclude that capitalism may serve as a solution to economic disintegration but not to anti-humanistic atrocities existing till present. In fact, capitalism can rightly be accused as the root of these atrocities.

The Anti-humanism of Capitalism

As already argued that economy is the biggest threat to a good human-human relationship, and as capitalism is the main economic system that promotes anti-humanism, it is directly proportional to conclude that capitalism is the biggest threat to humanism. Looking at the free-market system realized by capitalism, though many good outcomes have been generated, the negative aspect of it has been overwhelming. Of course I concur with T. Sedlacek that it is absurd to call free market evil on the basis of its negative effect without paying attention to its advantages.¹¹ But it is practically true also that almost everything we call evil has one or more positive sides of it; though negative from one context but probably positive from another context.

The misuses of free-market system have endangered the future of our generation. With unregulated market, producers have become so opportunistic (Opportunism refers to the practice of grasping at opportunities without regard of moral consideration)¹² and have engaged into many productive activities without moral considerations.¹³ Thus today we have many poisons produced for human consumption. Mainly for the sake of making profit chemicals have been used to produce food and meat resulting to diverse diseases such as cancer.

⁹ J.K. NYERERE, *Ujamaa*, 3.

¹⁰ A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 184.

¹¹ T. SEDLACEK, *Economics of Good and Evil*, 67.

¹² D.C. ROSE, *The Moral Foundation of Economic Behavior*, 22.

¹³ D.C. ROSE, *The Moral Foundation of Economic Behavior*, 22.

Apart from the aspect of production, free market system is also guilty of the environmental depreciation we are experiencing today. The industrial waste coming from many industries pollutes the land, air and water once disposed. Lack of hygiene, good sanitation and clean water for drinking is responsible for 7 percent of death and diseases globally.¹⁴ Increase in air pollution accounts for increase in bronchitis, heart disease, and cancer. Industrial chemicals such as lead, mercury, arsenic, cadmium, and dioxins contribute to the global decrease of health.¹⁵ The World Health Organization estimates that at least 3 million children under the age of 5 die annually as a result of environmental hazards.¹⁶ The case of the ozone layer is simply unspeakable. Deforestation is not a new case today; all for the purpose of making profit.

We also have though without justification issues of laboratory made diseases for the core purpose of generating money. Today in Africa, malaria remains a terrorist terrorizing almost the whole continent, yet it is arguable that many institutions and companies are benefiting from the existence of this terrorist in Africa which thus is the main reason why serious reaction is yet to be witnessed.

What about the production of deadly weapons. Currently almost in all countries we have industries where guns are produced. With the practice of free market system, people are free to go and purchase guns for their personal uses. But what mainly is the key purpose of guns if not for killing. One probable factor in some gun producing factories is that in order to enhance marketability of their products, any action is justified even if it means brothers fight fighting each other.

Another devastating effect of free market economy is the marketization of human organs. In today's market are found human organs such as kidney, liver and heart and other transplantable organs. With this practice human organs are now seen as mere products just like every other product in the market. Where then lays the difference between what we produce and we that produced it? Today we are bound to walk in fear because we can be attacked for the purpose of harvesting our organs for marketing.

One more important section where free market economy is gradually damaging the future generation is found in the burgeoning growth of pornographic industries. A lot of pornographic videos that paralyzes the minds of youths are already in the market. With a lot of video games available, children are easily carried away and at

¹⁴ P.S. WENS, "Environmental Health", 776.

¹⁵ P.S. WENS, "Environmental Health", 776.

¹⁶ Cf. P.S. WENS, "Environmental Health", 776.

the end of the day turns out to robbery, terrorism and other criminal activism in order to survive.¹⁷

It is therefore clear that capitalism is the mother of anti-humanism in the society. However, does this imply that capitalism has no humanistic element? Almost in all human societies today capitalistic elements have grounds making it close to impossible to expel from human realm. What then can be done to mitigate the situation? My response to the above question is that since capitalism can neither be expelled nor be fully encouraged due to its high demerits, it must be reinterpreted. There should an investigation targeted at fishing out those positive and humanistic elements of capitalism which must be reemphasized as the being qua being of capitalism. In other words, capitalism as instituted on profitmaking must be discouraged and its humanistic elements be encouraged.

The Humanism of Capitalism

Capitalism perceived as erroneous theory will be a very wrong perception. Adam Smith reckoned as the founder of capitalism is probably a humanist because even before the publication of the wealth of Nations he published his humanistic work titled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This is to imply that Smith as a humanist had no intention of promoting an anti-humanistic doctrine. Milton Friedman, 1976 Nobel Prize Winner once stated, “There is nothing that does so much harm as good intention.”¹⁸ This statement may be applied as a reaction to Smith’s intention. However, capitalism has made several contributions in increasing wealth globally though this global increase in wealth does not negate its anti-humanistic effects.

With the justification of Smith as a humanist, what is left to say concerning the anti-humanism of capitalism is the universal reality that this economic system has been abused. All the negative aforementioned effects triggered by capitalism depict the sectors in which this doctrine is approached by opportunists who are eagerly looking for an opportunity to better their pockets. Yes capitalism encourages competition, but the competition in question here is a healthy one where people are compelled to be more hardworking and creative in order to make better profit. An unhealthy competition in capitalism occurs when there is little effort and creativity coupled with the anticipation of enormous profit.

Departing from the point of view of opportunists, there is probably no amendment that can be made on capitalism that will not have any gap. In view of this, the best remedy to exterminate the terrifying effects of capitalism is to totally abdicate this economic system. However, on the basis that this is impossible, reemphasizing on the humanistic elements of capitalism may be the only way out.

¹⁷ A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral sentiments*, 340.

¹⁸ J.D. GWARTNEY – al., *Common Sense Economics*, X.

The key question here is, is it possible to acquire wealth in a humanistic manner? My response to this question is 'YES'.

Capitalism presupposes the paradigm premise of economy that people are interdependent. However, how can one get what one does not have? Two ways are possible: first, the owner gives it to you freely; second, the owner gives it to you under duress. The society promotes the former case and discourages the latter case as theft. Thus the number of people that gives to you determines the size of your pocket. Now looking at the former case, it logically follows that the higher the population of people that gives it to you freely is the higher your pocket.

However, how can one get wealthy following the logic already expressed? To acquire wealth presupposes receiving enough from the maximum number of people. But to receive from the people is possible only if you provide for them so as to have a mutual relationship. Thus they provide what you need from them while you in turn provide what they need from you. In other words, to get from more people directly implies giving to more people. To achieve this involves hard work and creativity which capitalism overemphasizes.

Humanism in capitalism is the basis for wealth. As already affirmed, wealth basically is triggered by receiving enough from higher population. But to receive from these people you must provide them their need. But to provide these needs presupposes being in the shoes of the people and thinking from their perspective and this is the core humanism. Thus from the perspective of capitalism, the more humanistic mindset you have the higher your potentiality of being rich.

Therefore humanism constitutes the core of capitalism such that a good humanist will make the best use of capitalism. Though it worth noting that the type of humanism needed in capitalism is such that requires creativity, the ability to produce something that you know is really needed from the members of your community will actually give you the opportunity to contribute to the needs and betterment of the community but further still befits you economically

Heretofore, capitalism approached from individual perspective will only lead to the abusiveness of capitalism. This is because the desire to benefit yourself from the pockets of others without them benefiting from your skills is the very beginning of anti-humanism which definitely is not the right approach to capitalism.

Capitalism and Underdevelopment Reviewed

Capitalism has often been conceived as the wrong economic system in bettering the economy of the underdeveloped world. This is simply because majority of these people are poor and of course lacks capital needed to run their own business and generate income. It is true that in capitalism humanism and creativity is not enough, there should be a capital to finance the project.

However, when we look at the developed countries where capitalism has flourished, before their embracement of capitalism, did every one of them have capital to survive in the new economic system called capitalism? The answer to this question I suppose is negative because the strong economic system Europe is enjoying today was expedited under capitalism.

Furthermore, European countries and even the strong economy of United States have undergone recession where the middle class regressed to low classes resulting to lack of capital to continue with capitalism. How did they survive these recessions and continues to benefit in capitalism? From these countries one can argue against the popular belief that capitalism cannot favor underdeveloped and developing countries.

Moreover, if the popular belief is true that capitalism is not in favor of underdeveloped countries thus leaving socialism at their disposal, how can the economic development of these countries be facilitated since socialism prioritizes humanism at the expense of economic growth? Socialism as we have seen already does not catalyze hard work and creativity like capitalism, how then can people who need economic emancipation the most retire to such a system? How can the developed countries that are already wealthy be encouraging hard work and creativity while the poor countries tends to discourage it by embracing socialism?

It is worth noting that some of these underdeveloped countries especially African countries are highly endowed with natural resources which should include them among the wealthiest countries globally speaking. Capitalism thus can still be criticized because it gives room to private ownership leading to the high rate of corruption in these countries. This criticism I will respond to by referring to the opposite world, why is the developed world benefiting greatly in capitalism even when it encourages corruption? Legal systems and not capitalism plays the most vital role in mitigating corruption. What Africa needs to analyze and rectify is not capitalism but the legal system. Moreover, corruption makes reference to selfishness which is possible only at the misconception of capitalism.

Back to our key question here, how can the underdeveloped countries survive through capitalism? The response to this question may not be found in Adam Smith but in J.M. Keynes. According to him (Keynes) the government should intervene in the economy system especially when there is economic crisis.¹⁹ During economic recession when business men and farmers lack capital, the government should intervene by circulating funds so that business and farming activities continues, lest, famine becomes the unavoidable guest.

Following Keynes doctrine, the government of the underdeveloped world should prioritize economic growth in their countries. This is because majority of

¹⁹ J.M KEYNES, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, General Introduction.

these governments invests in other sectors like security; buying so many weapons from the developed countries instead of investing in productive activities in the country. The issue of corruption still remains the biggest threat to development of these regions. In reaction to this, the legal system should be reformulated. In most African countries, politicians such as senators, governors, and presidents earn more than their counterparts in the developed world thus making it one of the most profitable careers available. It is not surprising that they are willing to end their lives in order to remain in power. More importantly, accountability and transparency are not yet prioritized in the legal system thereby giving room to corruption and mismanagement of funds.

Furthermore, poverty in the underdeveloped world has made selfishness the order of the day; humanistic thinking, the core root of benefiting greatly in capitalism, has found no room. This explains why these regions are less creative and productive in comparison to their counterparts. Moreover, even if capitalism is totally expelled and socialism is welcomed in this territory, opportunists will still find room for maneuvering just like they are doing now. Private funds can still be hidden outside the continent and so will corruption continue to thrive. Socialism does not encourage hard work and creativity, thus may unleash more harm than good to the underdeveloped world.

Conclusion

The identity of a human person is one that is vindicated through his actions. Owing to daily economic struggles for survival, humans have always betrayed their identity. Capitalism which supposed to be used for the betterment of humanism on the contrary has been used for selfish ends. The atrocities oozing out from the free market system depicts the different domains where human acts are in conflict with their identity. At the wrong hands capitalism is the biggest threat in the society, the communal is sacrificed at the expense of the individual. Once this becomes the case, capitalism ceases to be capitalism but crime. A return to capitalism begins with a fight against selfishness and an emphasis once more on the communal. Capitalism is an “I-Thou” economics. It depicts humanism in practice. It fosters both the growth of the individual and that of the society. In humanism, human identity is fully realized. Summed up by Martin Buber:

“Individualism sees man only in relation to himself, but collectivism does not see man at all, it sees only ‘society’. With the former man’s face is distorted, with the latter it is masked.”²⁰

²⁰ M. BUBER, *Between Man and Man*, 200.

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