

The Culture of Capitalism and Praxis Needs

God helps them that help themselves

"Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

"God helps them that help themselves."

"Lost time is never found again."

"Plough deep while sluggards sleep, and you shall have corn to sell and keep, says Poor Dick."

"He that lives upon hope will die fasting."

"There are no gains without pains."

"If you would be wealthy, think of saving as well as of getting."

So wrote Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) in *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1733-1758).



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"A penny saved is a penny earned."

Acquisitive

It was Adam Smith (1723-1790), the Scottish political philosopher and economist, who laid out the fundamental principles of laissez-faire capitalism in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Primary among these principles is his clarification of a basic human motivation. According to Smith, man is, by nature, acquisitive. People are driven by the desire to accumulate material wealth. And it is a demand that is never satisfied. It is a drive innate within all of humanity, a drive to maximize one's own gains and to minimize one's own losses; it is the drive for self-interest. In the ebbs and flows of the supply and demand market-place, this desire fuels the system and is measured in terms of profit. As such, capitalism is predicated on an ever-expanding economy; it is predicated on growth. Without this elementary human condition, capitalism would cease and collapse.



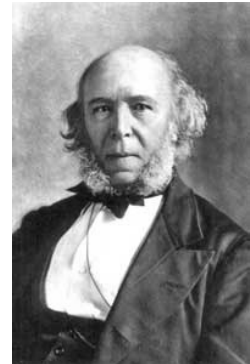
Capitalism had not manifested itself as a significant economic system prior to the European Renaissance, where an economy based upon peasant feudalism had predominated. After the Renaissance, capitalism emerged and flourished in the colonially expansive Europe (ca. 1600-present).

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“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.”

Survival of the Fittest

The English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) added still another clarification of human motivation. Borrowing loosely from the model of biological evolution as developed by Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Spencer applied an evolutionary model to human social institutions. Through time, human society evolves into more advanced states. Progress is endemic to human institutions and is inevitable. The mechanism for this advancement is what Spencer called "survival of the fittest." Some individuals in society and some societies among various societies are better endowed than others to adapt to the rigors of competition. They have a natural right to initiate, direct and benefit from societal institutions. Progress depends upon their initiatives. The human condition is a competitive condition. And a competitive individual is a strong and successful individual.



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"Rugged individualism."

Emerging “Individualism”

"Individualism is a word recently coined to express a new idea."

"Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into a circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."

"There are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands."

"Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart, forgetting his ancestors, his descendants and isolating himself from his contemporaries."

"It is odd to watch with what feverish ardor Americans pursue prosperity, ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it. They cleave to the



things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if they expected to stop living before they relished them. Death steps in, in the end, and stops them, before they have grown tired of this futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes them."

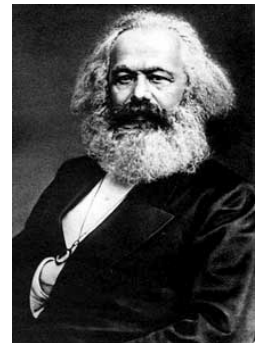
So wrote the French social philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), in *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. Tocqueville traveled throughout America of the 1830s, observing the emerging character of its people.

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"Praxis" "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

The Modes of Production

Karl Marx (1818-1883), the German political philosopher and economist, also advocated a doctrine of inevitable progress; but, a progress that would lead to a classless society. The mechanism driving this progress is dialectical materialism. Following Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Marx maintained that history is a struggle between opposing societal forces, i.e., a thesis and an antithesis. Out of this dynamic, a new synthesis emerges. Unlike Hegel, Marx held that primary in this struggle are the material conditions that prevail in society. Marx reversed Hegel's position which held that consciousness defined the praxis. For Marx, the "modes of production," how people make a living, determines the entire societal infrastructure. What drives humans are their material needs. The structures of the family, the religious institutions and the belief systems of a people are molded by their "modes of production." Demonstration of dialectical materialism is found in the feudal society of the Middle Ages. Nobility and clergy formed the thesis, while a growing trade-oriented middle class, the bourgeoisie, formed as an antithesis in this class struggle. Following the French and American revolutions, a synthesis emerged, forming the capitalist class. The new class, in turn, oppressed the workers, the proletariat, which represents the new antithesis. The struggle continues, with economics and the modes of production driving the entire system.



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"Be the best you can be." "A Poor Man Shames Himself"

Protestant Ethic

In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1904-05, the German social philosopher, Max Weber (1864-1920), considered market exchange, rather than

modes of production, as the defining feature of capitalism. The emergence of the focus on market exchanges in pursuit of wealth and possessions were driven by a new “spirit” of rational calculation firmly anchored in the rise of Protestantism. When the Reformation effectively removed the assurance of personal salvation through participation in the Roman Catholic Church and placed it on the shoulders of the individual, the motivation to rationally pursue economic gain and worldly success as an expression of one’s spiritual redemption was born. Economizing was given a high moral significance. The zeal in which one engaged his work and the accumulation of material possessions from that work were thus signs demonstrating the bestowing of God’s grace. The “spirit of capitalism” was gradually codified into law, rendering individual wage-laborers legally “free” to sell their work and accumulate wealth, in a market environment.



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“Three Hots and a Cot.”

Hierarchy of Needs

One of the most influential theories on the development of a healthy personality was that proposed by the American humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). The premise of Maslow's theory of human motivation is what he called a "hierarchy of needs." There are five levels of human achievement, each of which must be satisfied before the next can be attempted. The first level comprises the basic physiological needs, such as food, clothing and shelter. The second level revolves around safety and security needs. Love and belonging needs are expressed at the third level. The fourth level focuses on the needs of self-esteem. And the final level, the fifth level, comprises what Maslow calls "self-actualization." This level focuses on being well adjusted to one's entire situation and reality. It is here where spiritual gratification and insight into truth are obtained. Because of the ascending and progressive requirements of these levels, few people ever reach self-actualization; and those who do are in a continual effort to maintain that state. Basic survival, the praxis needs, must first be satisfied before the higher levels of consciousness can be achieved.

