

Cultural Critiques of Capitalism

Michael Matheson Miller
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I. Introduction

- a. Does Capitalism destroy Culture?
- b. This is a complex topic, in part because there are many definitions and demarcations of both capitalism and culture
- c. The political Left and Right are both concerned about this topic, but for different reasons
- d. Capitalism disrupts and can destroy elements of culture and society
 - i. This comes with positive effects, as well as negative ones – there are tradeoffs
- e. Breakdown of culture cannot be entirely blamed on capitalism/ free markets

II. Capitalism and Culture: Negatives and Positives

- a. Negatives: One of the main problems is what Joseph Schumpeter called: *Creative Destruction*
 - i. Negative impacts of mobility and migration on families
 - ii. Structural unemployment
 - iii. Technology and social disruption
 - iv. Social change
 - v. Opportunities for exploitation of the poor
 - vi. Individualism (in a negative sense)
 - vii. Consumerism
 - viii. False concepts of autonomy and creativity
 - ix. Crude utilitarian business/management mentality
 - x. Volatility, anxiety, and unrest
- b. Positives: There are also many positive elements brought about by capitalism and markets, including:
 - i. Opportunity for the poor
 - ii. Rich and poor can both get richer
 - iii. Circles of exchange (see *Centessimus Annus* #42)
 - iv. Limits the state
 - v. Allows for competition
 - vi. Allows people to move and seek better opportunities
 - vii. Following the principle of subsidiarity and allows people to create solutions to their own problems.
 - viii. Can build social capital, a sense of trust, and positive interdependence
 - ix. Reduces the occasion for envy (see *Commercial Society*)
 - x. Can reduce social unrest, class tensions, and limit exploitation of the poor.
 - xi. Increase in life expectancy, etc. (see www.gapminder.org)
- c. While capitalism does disturb the social order, there are many other issues have a greater negative impact: nominalism, relativism, radical equality, radical autonomy, methodological individualism, hyper-rationalism, etc.



- d. Capitalism is often a proxy for other harder-to-diagnose sources of cultural breakdown or topics that would be politically unwise to address, such as equality and democracy.

III. Capitalism and Tocqueville

- a. Important question – *how can we mitigate the negative effects of capitalism while maintaining the positive ones?*
- b. Tocqueville saw the positive aspects of democracy but also the many problems it brought to society; many of his concerns about democracy parallel concerns about capitalism.
- c. To mitigate the radical individualism, egalitarianism, etc., Tocqueville recommended local politics, civil society, and religion.
 - i. Local politics because people are involved in public life, which checks centralization (subsidiarity);
 - ii. Civil society – or intermediate institutions – also prevent centralization and build community;
 - iii. Religion is centrally important because free societies require morality. Also, religion tempers excesses.

IV. Conclusion

- a. There are serious cultural problems but capitalism is not the only cause.
- b. Christopher Dawson, historian, says that *cultus* (religion) is the driving force of culture and society – not the economic structure.
- c. Much of our current problems are from our secularist culture, which can be exacerbated by capitalism.

Reading Recommendations

Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy in America

John Paul II: Centesimus Annus

Joel Salatin: Folks This Ain't Normal and Everything I Want to Do is Illegal

Juliet Schor: Born to Buy

Wilhelm Ropke: A Humane Economy

Christopher Dawson: Progress and Religion

Robert Nisbet: The Quest for Community

Mathew Crawford: Shopcraft as Soulcraft

Taylor Cowen: Creative Destruction

