

Capitalism & Coercion

A brief introduction to commodity, alienation and exploitation

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section one, commodity and necessity

A commodity can be defined as a human need or want that is bought and sold. Under capitalism, we take things, ranging from necessities like clothes and food, to airplanes and mansions, and we commodify them. We “put them up for sale.”

If you’ve seen *The Lorax*, you’ll know that a massive part of the plot is the main villain packaging and selling air. Audiences are meant to scoff at this, at the commodification of something so needed, a natural resource. But if we look around us, we can see examples of this happening more than you might think. Water, food, and land are equally as necessary to human survival as is oxygen, but they are packaged, sold for money, and kept out of the hands of those who cannot afford them. But that begs the question: it is your land legally, under a capitalist system, but can it really be “your land?” People are on this earth together, but we have decided it is alright to have five hundred thousand homeless people and seventeen million empty homes in America. We’ve decided that if you’re born into a good family, you can grow to own hundreds of acres of land, but if you aren’t, you might not have land at all.

This is the system we have been raised to accept, we know no other way. But we can see now that the system is failing. Or rather, succeeding. The church, the state, and the rich have all worked together throughout history to lift each other up. To keep each other in power. The church does not condemn those who hoard, only those who steal. The state mandates fines and bails easily escapable by the wealthy. The rich spread false information to bust unions in hope of preventing worker resilience. Every authority, every hierarchy, every coercive force is working against us at once.

We, you and I, cannot be understood as a class. Under modern capitalism, the workers are not a single class. This is how it was understood during the nineteenth century, but for modern reasons, such as status, housing level and available education, classes are more numerous than two. It is better, in the opinion of me along with many historical anarchists *message explaining how i’ll touch on this later* that the workers, those who do not exploit, are better understood as a mass. A mass of people from many backgrounds, many places and cultures, united by one thing. We have all been blindly coerced and lied to for our entirety.

Commodity establishes things that should not be bought and sold, rather shared, as objects to be privately owned. The cheapest, quickest and easiest way to house the homeless is to give them houses, but capitalists feel this would be unfair. We could have established green energy, but oil C.E.Os have ties with our state, which protects them. Medicine is something people need to survive, but instead of society taking care of it’s sick, people plunge themselves into medical debt whilst the rich collect horses and beach houses. Commodity is why we sit around collecting, hoarding, while people starve. We have the material to feed these people, so something is stopping them from being fed. The commodification of everything we do, everything we touch, even who we are as people, is at the root of capital. To abolish capital is to abolish commodities. To abolish commodities is to enact liberty.

section two, exploitation and anger.

Exploitation is a form of coercive theft. Exploitation takes the work of the laborer and provides profit for the boss. So how does this relate to capitalism? Under capitalism we are told that money relates to the amount of work you put in. This is how the system works, you work hard, you play hard. You get paid for hard work, and it's okay that there are privileged people in society because those people did the work to get there. There are a couple issues with this however, one of which is the modern distribution of wealth.

When we see someone like Jeff Bezos, a mega gajillionaire, we are pretty shocked. It's not fair. But this is often viewed as an unjust jealousy, peasant foolery under capitalism. But I must ask, how is one who has nothing supposed to view someone that has more than everything, and not have doubts, or angers? Is anger not a just response to this? We are told that life is not fair, that the way things are is the way things are. But there is no force keeping the things you need in the hands of those who don't need them other than themselves and the state. Nothing makes them intrinsically theirs, you need it more, what is morally wrong with you taking it? But instead, the rich offer us something so we don't get out the guillotines. They offer us something far more grim.

According to salary.com, the median salary of a C.E.O in America is about 800 thousand dollars annually. We cannot be accused of using Jeff Bezos, an outlier, if we are to use median. So, why is this? You work for your boss at Work.Co and make, say, 50,000 dollars a year. Your boss comes to work later than you, goes home earlier than you, and bosses people around for a living. Yet he makes sixteen times what you do. The point is, he is not working sixteen times harder. If we take a single mother with two full time jobs trying to provide for her children, it's pretty clear that she works very hard for herself and her family. Curiously, she makes but 40,000 dollars a year, while both of her bosses make over twenty times that.

This is a pretty simplistic critique of the private ownership of the means of production, but there is something more to this. But before we get to this, what are the means of production? Means are a way of getting goals accomplished, and production is the process in which items are made. The means of production are the way, the vehicle we use to create commodities under capitalist rule. The means of production are traditionally ideas like factories, but in a modern world, the means of production are everywhere. Workshops, offices, warehouses and bedrooms. The means of production are no longer places, but people. The laborers produce, not in a single place, but rather everywhere. We are tools of commodity, we have become slaves to labor, slaves to wage, and these are shackles we cannot escape if we are to remain under capitalism. The private ownership of the means of production puts the power of the laborers into the hands of the rich. The power produced by the laborers is no longer in the hands of the laborer.

Leftists often discuss ideas like private ownership, specifically of the means of production. So, when one person has a right to be in charge of, to own and to have, the place where goals are completed, and by extension, the laborers within those places, the laborers are inevitably exploited. When your boss makes twenty times what you do, they don't work twenty times as hard, they are not getting the money from their labor. They are getting the money from yours. Leftists insist that the people, the workers, the masses are entitled to the fruits of their own labor. But of course, when your boss makes your money, when your boss is profiting off of your work, you are not being given the fruits of the labor you do. If a man has one hundred employees, and he makes more than all of them combined, he is robbing them. If his workers all quit, he would

make no money, which means his money is coming directly from them. His workers carry his business on their backs, but he makes more. He does not work harder, but he is entitled, by our system, to the money produced by other's labor.

When there are people without clothes and empty looms, one should be allowed to make clothes. But of course, the owner of these specific looms, the exploiter that maintains control over the textile industry, does not allow you to do so. Not out of concern for the worker, but out of concern of the wallet, those who own the private means of production are not only allowed, but encouraged to disregard the needs of others in the name of greed.

Returning to the idea that private ownership of the means of production goes hand in hand with exploitation of the workers for profit, we must view how other forces interact and examine this idea. Theft is a concept used to describe the taking of one's objects, privately owned by the individual. But this is a very capitalist definition, and even using it, the capitalists are still guilty of robbing the laborers. Of the fruits of their labors, of the money stolen from them, of the means to live. But this is a theft, once again that the state won't punish, and that the church won't condemn. Even legally recognized theft is lied about, over 90% of theft in 2018 was wage theft, and not robbery, burglary or any theft of an individual's assets. Yet the state, the church and the boss all teach us to view theft as something that is dangerous to us, not via the company, but via other workers.

But how does capitalism make us view other workers? How does our society interact with bosses, and how do bosses justify bigotry between workers? Are other workers the enemy?

section three, alienation and youth

fair warning, lots of philosophy ahead, so if you don't understand it at first, or are uncomfortable with concepts like nihilism and loneliness, please skip

Sign value is an important concept if we attempt to understand late stage, or modern capitalism. The common understanding of leftists is that the value of a commodity is decided by the labor input into the commodity, but a new form of value has emerged since the nineteenth century. Sign value, first described by Jean Baudrillard, is a new way of looking at value through a philosophical lens. Essentially, life is meaningless, and capitalism attempts to fill our subjective voids with pointless commodities. The capitalist injects commodities with artificial purpose, or meaning, and the consumer hopes to be marked by that meaning when they consume or brand themselves with said commodity. Branding, political campaigns, even art, these are all "signs" that one projects on to themselves, hoping to essentially commodify themselves with a false narrative.

When I say life is meaningless, I do not mean it in a negative sense. It is hard to find objective, universal truths. Humans have argued for millenia over what is inherently right, inherently wrong. But I argue that nothing is "inherently wrong." Trying to find objective purpose in life is pointless, because humans are not united in cause. We are here for reasons we do not understand, and never will. Instead of debating it, we may as well move on. Objective meaning is a lie, but that is not a curse. The lack of one truth just means our subjective interpretations of life are all the more meaningful. (I promise I have a point.) This lack of purpose is bothersome to many, so the forces of coercion seek to fill a void, essentially keeping people under control. When capitalists do it, it's through a false sense of status through sign value.

Capitalism is essentially attempting to fill a void, that it itself is causing. That is why we feel off. Systemic coercion through church, state or capital, attempts to give life purpose, whilst simultaneously subtracting subjective meaning from the hands of the individual and using the emptiness left in the heart of the mass to manipulate said mass into exploitation. What the hell does that mean? Essentially, there is nothing, and that's okay. People should have the right to live how they please, live for whatever purpose they choose, and do whatever they like. They should follow a subjective moral code. And when capitalism tells us that instead of a blessing, this lack of "truth" is a curse, we are forced to listen. So now we have a void in the hearts and the minds of the masses, and capitalism proposes a solution, but it is also the problem itself. This void that we have, the state, church and boss all try to mend it. But this mending is also advancing their own goals. The church restricts your freedom and dullens your life, and tells you without it's rules you would be meaningless. The state commands you to serve and love it, and without that love you are a burden to society. The boss tells you to work hard and clock out, and that without a job you are but a leech. But isn't he a leech?

So now you have no purpose. So now you have a false sense of security, but as we wake up to the troubles around us, we lose it. So now, we as youth, see that we've been lied to. But we still must stand for the flag, kneel for the cross and work for the boss. We are waking up to the fact that we are being lied to, and that is dangerous for them. You see, when capitalism rules the world, alienation is bound to happen. Rather than helping those around him, his community, doing things out of generosity, man is encouraged to isolate and hoard. You are left alone with nothing but nationalistic fetishism, commodity and the remains of your own freedom crushed by the church.

We are alienated by our boss from the fruits of our labor. We are alienated by the church from the freedom of our thought. We are alienated by the state from the nature of man. We are alone on a journey to a life of exploitation and pain. Alone on a life of coercion and oppression. So we sit alone on a throne of collectible playing cards, we wear gowns dressed up in logos, and we take pictures of ourselves doing fun things to commodify our own experience, to reduce our own life as a mere aesthetic to be observed and judged. Commodity culture, empty meaning and coercive force. We are being held back, and nobody but us can help push us forward.

It is the fetishization, by the masses, of things that hold us back such as nationalism, property, hoarding and the self. But of course, not all hope is lost. Life is meaningless, which means you give your own life meaning. What meaningless lives can you change in a meaningful way? Everybody is on this earth. Isn't making someone's day a little better just enough to keep you going? We can dedicate our time to helping each other even under capitalism. Mutual aid is an anarchist principal that focuses on community support systems and education. There are mutual aid chapters all over the world. We probably won't escape capital, at least in our lifetimes, but we can resist it. We can fuel ourselves for future uprisings, we can be educated about the dangers of capitalism, we can hope to improve conditions in our society by any means necessary.

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This essay was originally written as a video script, which is why it may appear to be strange or have certain errors, or even sound like casual spoken speech. This is aimed at a liberal audience, so other anarchists / leftists will most likely have critiques of it. We appreciate them, but please keep the audience in mind. Thanks!

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