

Economic and Social “Isms”

by Bill Herbst

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I don't write much about economic systems, at least not in the abstract. All of the various popular or well-known constructs for how commerce (meaning the exchange of goods and services) should operate in society — Capitalism, Socialism, Marxism, Communism, Libertarianism, Syndicalism, Fascism, etc. — seem to me theoretically coherent. They all reflect a high level of internal consistency. Within the limited context of their own philosophical frameworks, each seems to make good sense. The problem is that all of them are undone and corrupted by certain unfortunate aspects of individual and collective human nature. None of them works worth a damn in actual practice. Oh, maybe they do OK for awhile, but inevitably, each ends up failing us. The greater or common good is not served.

Greed — selfish and excessive desire for more of something than is needed (typically money) — is probably the most obvious of these less-than-wonderful traits in human beings that lead to corruption of every economic system or philosophy. Simple greed, however, doesn't strike me as the best or even an adequate way to accurately understand what goes wrong. A more encompassing and nuanced framework for the undoing is the *Us-versus-Them dynamic* from moral psychology. I write often about that dynamic and probably will continue to hammer away at it, since I find it so revealing. Greed aligned with the dynamic of Us-versus-Them translates as more (or everything) for Us, and less (or nothing at all) for Them. And that seems to me to describe pretty well the 21st century world in which we live.

What impresses me most about Us-versus-Them is that it goes beyond mere economics. Yes, it reveals motives into many of the issues about how material wealth is distributed in civilization, but it adds other levels of insight into how society is organized and its affairs conducted — kinship, race, competition and cooperation, war, injustice, etc. Us-versus-Them weaves *love* into the equations of why we feel and act as we do, and how we can go so wrong, even with good intentions. We love Us, but we don't care about Them, and it's a short trip to go from not caring to despising and even to killing whenever we need a scapegoat. If we could only get rid of Them, everything would be fine.

Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is a landmark treatise on early and mostly local capitalism that seems to me quite reasonable. I feel the same way about Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*. Both of these seminal and famous writings can be critiqued, dismantled, and invalidated, as many people have done (and continue to do), but from within their own universes of logic and practicality,

they both reveal thoughtful and cogent considerations about economics and society.

Once applied to the crucible of real life, however, and then allowed to grow to gargantuan scale, both capitalism and communism become monstrous. That said, I don't think it's fair to place all the blame for the horrors of the Soviet Union on communism, nor the terrible failures of America on capitalism. And yet, these are the terms commonly used in public discourse. In America, millions of people seem to never tire of attacking socialism while defending capitalism by setting up ridiculous Straw Man arguments. The same occurs in reverse — attacking capitalism while defending socialism — although in this country that's done less often and by fewer people.

The whole sorry history of the American Empire can, in poetic terms, be laid at the feet of our longstanding obsession with economic and social "isms." And we continue, quite foolishly, to argue about both the absolute and relative merits of Capitalism versus Socialism, as if one could be entirely correct and the other entirely wrong. We tend to reduce everything to its most simplistic and didactic terms — black or white, good or bad, one or the other.

I wasn't around for the Red Scare of the early 20th-century in this country (the Palmer Raids and deportations of "anarchists"), and frankly, I'm glad I missed that. I was born in 1949, three months after the Russians tested their first atomic bomb. The McCarthy hearings and witch hunts for Communists hiding under our beds were part of my childhood. My adolescence was accompanied by the nuclear arms race and the specter of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction). The entire Cold War was an exercise in ideological lies, deceit, and half-truths. In some ways, being an American means being a member of "Team Capitalism" and believing that Communism sucks. But Capitalism sucks, too. Big time. In actual practice, all the "isms" fail miserably.

The problem, as I see it, is that all the economic systems are vulnerable to human corruption. As a result, I'm less inclined to focus on the economics, *per se*, and more on how human beings pervert whatever system we might adopt. To understand that, I find myself returning often to certain metaphysical or cosmological narratives about human life on earth and why we're the way we are. I don't believe any of these narratives as literal explanations for how the cosmos actually operates, but I appreciate a good story, and some of these mythic narratives do have a certain poetic resonance for me.

One narrative I keep coming back to is the fairly popular idea that the presumably individual spirits which, for one reason or another, choose to incarnate as human beings on our Goldilocks planet vary dramatically in their "spiritual maturity." How we approach and deal with the pleasures and torments of life on earth, according to this story, probably has less to do with our human, ego-based selves than it does with our invisible, intangible, but more deeply embedded spiritual experience (i.e. our development as "souls").

Basically, this story holds that the human beings who are most drawn to power, authority, and domination of others are the least mature among us spiritually. At the soul level, they're essentially the equivalent of young children, maybe at kindergarten level, and perhaps even closer to infancy.

Oh sure, these people may be (and often are) smart as whips in IQ or street savvy, and they look like grown-ups, but they're stuck in the "Terrible Twos," that early phase of childhood development where the ego-self is paramount — I, Me, Mine. Young children going through this phase have precious little empathy with others, and often no sympathy at all. In the narrative, these immature souls comprise a majority of the elites who run civilization and determine damn near everything about how society operates, from codified law to accepted norms of behavior. Basically, though, they're babies. They wreak havoc — sometimes intentionally, but more often because they fail to anticipate the repercussions of their actions. And the rest of us end up paying the price. As an explanation for why civilization is so fucked up, I find that compelling.

Think about the various institutions that make up what is blithely called the "Deep State." CIA, FBI, NSA — organizations like that (and those are just the most obvious candidates; there are almost certainly other groups less visible than those). I'm not talking about the classic conspiracies here — the Illuminati or the Freemasons or the Bilderbergers. No, I'm just referring to organizations that are part of the vast government apparatus of the American state. Who are the people that run these agencies and the thousands of corporations that comprise the military-industrial complex? Well, they're babies with guns, computers, and lots of money. From the planners and decision-makers who chart strategies through the clerical and technical staff that run the day-to-day operations to the agents and other "operatives" on the ground who carry out the nefarious black ops. Babies all. Very powerful babies, but babies nonetheless.

Consider the Dulles brothers — Allan Dulles and John Foster Dulles, who were seminal figures in post-World War II America. They rose to power as Wall Street lawyers who championed American Exceptionalism, Capitalism, and Christianity. During the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s, John Foster Dulles was Secretary of State, while Allen Dulles was the first head of the CIA, stepchild of World War II's OSS. Both brothers were dedicated, hard-core Cold Warriors who were quite happy to oversee America's imperial misadventures in global meddling — coups, assassinations, and the like. In short, they were monsters. When their time was through, they handed the baton to assholes like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, who then subsequently bequeathed their egregious legacy of war and torture to the current generation of spiritual babies. The line of succession has remained unbroken to this day.

Beyond the Deep State, there are the business and financial sectors of corporate America. It's well established in social psychology that many (I'd say most) of the people who claw their way to the top of the corporate hierarchy — CEOs and such — test much higher than the rest of us for narcissism and sociopathy. Again, although they're smart and sophisticated, they're essentially big babies in Armani suits. They already run the money system and the tech world, and

they're busily implementing the complete takeover of civilization and reduction of humanity (meaning the rest of us) to drones who serve the beehive.

For such people, it hardly matters what economic or social system we choose as our organizational principle. Their will to power, their arrogance, and — perhaps most importantly — their skewed sense of *Us versus Them* will corrupt whatever system is in place. Every economic and social framework requires people willing to do the right thing, which invariably includes a certain amount of self-sacrifice. Far too many of those who own and run America and virtually all the other industrialized nations of the world lack those qualities. They tell themselves (and us) that they're dedicated to service, but feathering their own nests underpins everything they do.

Consider any of the astonishing discoveries, inventions, and developments of the modern age, from electricity to the internet. The likelihood is that their inventors and originators probably envisioned them as aiding humanity and improving civilization. Inevitably, though, all such developments end up co-opted. The spiritual babies who run the show want everything for themselves, and too many of us are willing to be their minions.

The breakdown of consensus and lack of trust in institutional authority now so prevalent in America represent a double-edged sword. On the one hand, that fosters in much of the public the powerful wish for a messianic leader — the strong father figure in the mold of historical patriarchy — who will solve all our problems for us, whether through the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the Rapture/End of Days or Donald Trump and the magical restoration of White America. This cult-of-personality wish leans hard in the most authoritarian direction and is merely the current renewal of an old, worn-out story.

On the other hand, the erosion of consensus and trust could lead to a collective uprising where we begin (for perhaps the first time in the history of civilization) to collectively demand that our leaders be held accountable. The spiritual babies who want to be in charge won't mature on their own. We must hold their feet to the fire. We'd damn well better grow up, because they won't, but that will require a rebellion unlike any that has ever occurred before.

At this point, the odds are overwhelmingly in favor of the first outcome rather than the second. That's the path of least resistance. If we go down that road (as is clearly happening), our doom is virtually sealed. For the latter, more positive outcome to have even a modest chance, we'll need to survive the coming trial by fire — the ordeal of societal collapse and all the draconian developments coming hard down the pike as breakdown occurs. The babies in charge will take advantage of every crisis to implement their schemes. Actually, they'll cause many of the crises. That's just what they do.

Growing up is hard, and standing up is even harder, but the work is right in front of us.