

# Superiority

by Bill Herbst

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I regard most “isms” as failed ideologies. Capitalism, Libertarianism, Socialism, and Communism all seem like perfectly logical schemes whose worldviews are internally consistent. In my opinion, though, none of them work worth a damn in real life. The problems they create for individuals, societies, and collective humanity far outweigh whatever benefits they claim. Same with Catholicism, Protestantism, Agnosticism, Atheism, and all the other major world religions. All these designs amount to purely intellectual exercises that exist mainly as pie-in-the-sky idealism. Dreams from another universe perhaps, but not this one. Once released “into the wild” — into the messy crucible of actual human reality — they all quickly devolve into bullshit dogma and instruments of cruelty.

Living in America, we are subjected to an endless stream of pro-capitalist sentiments, most of which I regard as propaganda, a mix of cherry-picked facts, half-truths, and outright lies. But this country does not practice anything even remotely resembling true free-market capitalism. What we have in America is austerity capitalism for the poor and powerless, but welfare socialism for the rich and powerful.

The closest I come to being an ideologue is in regard to ownership of property. In general, I’m against it. I think the territoriality of “me, my, mine” that forms the very basis of civilization has led to a world of guaranteed suffering. I don’t, however, stand on that belief nor proselytize for non-ownership because that possibility has zero relationship to the human and earthly worlds we live in. I accept that ownership has become the way things are.

That leads me to my ideological fallback position. As long as we’re going to have ownership, then, in the realms of economics and social structure, I’m a *syndicalist*. I believe, quite fervently, that the workers in a business should share in the ownership of that business. They should have a say in how the fruits of their labors — meaning profits — are distributed. In our current almost religious version of corporate capitalism, that notion is regarded with horror as a cardinal sin. Employees are considered nothing more than hired contract workers — a lower caste than owners — and they’re presumed to have no legitimate voice in how profits should be distributed. The Board of Directors enjoys that privilege, and their sole concern is benefitting their shareholders.

This was not invariably the case in all earlier forms of capitalism. Sometimes the welfare of stakeholders — which is to say, people not technically part of the business but affected by it — could be considered in corporate decisions, along with shareholders wishes — the technical owners of the business. That is to say, concerns might extend beyond just the “legal owners” to the some notion of the greater good. This is no longer the case in modern corporate America, and that prohibition has now been codified into law. Publicly-held corporations are legally forbidden to consider anything other than benefit to shareholders (i.e., owners). But such is the power of the ownership class to rig the system in its favor.

Whenever I come across a headline about a conflict between management and labor, I don't need to read the explanatory text. I'm instantly on the side of labor. I'm not saying that my reaction is always justified or correct. I'm just admitting my hard-core bias. Everything I've seen over my lifetime has led me inexorably to the belief that the way modern civilization treats workers is — in most cases of companies that employ workers — a crime, a disgrace, and an insult to humanity.

The basic presumption of modern American corporate culture seems to be that “owners” — whether they are the entrepreneurs who started the business and built it up from scratch or the shareholders who purchased their ownership stake as a monetary investment — are special and superior. They are the “job creators” and “philanthropists” (or so the propaganda talking points go), and they deserve the lion's share of whatever profits their companies produce. In this view, workers are basically drones. They are literally less special and inferior.

This perspective is linked with neoliberalism's “trickle-down” belief, that the people at the top of the social food chain — the entrepreneurs, executives, and owners — are somehow “self-made” (almost always false) and the source of all or most of the goodness that society produces (also false). Still, in this perverted right-wing fairy tale, it follows then that wealthiest among us are deserving of a disproportionate share of whatever added value we create. In their upside-down world, we help the poor by giving to the rich.

I don't accept that for a second. I see all this as tied to slavery, which has been civilization's most basic modus operandi from the get-go so many millennia ago. Human civilization organized itself along the same lines as ant colonies and beehives, with rigid classes based on power and status. Essentially, this boils down to winners and losers. Winners get everything, and losers get enslaved.

The terms “labor” and “workers” are just nicer ways to say “slaves” or “losers.”

Do I believe that the newest employee hired to work in the mail room should receive the same financial compensation as a CEO with a lifetime of experience creating and running a business? No, I don't. Not even close. I do, however,

think that the system we have in place now — where CEOs are routinely paid as much as 10,000 times more than lowly workers — is wrong and evil.

In my book, it's reasonable that a competent CEO receive perhaps 50 times the financial compensation of an average worker. In that proportionality, if a worker were paid \$40,000 a year, the CEO would get \$2,000,000. But no, the rich want more. From where I sit, it looks like they want *everything*. The elites in America (i.e., the wealthy) have rigged the system to outrageous extremes, with the result that someone like Jeff Bezos has a net worth of \$140 billion, while workers in an Amazon warehouse don't get bathroom breaks, have to piss into a cup, and can't afford to buy even a modest home, much less send their kids to college.

I don't know how many people in America believe that's OK, but, whatever the number, it's too many. Far too many of the wealthy obviously do believe it. I don't care what their reasons are, nor how carefully they've crafted their rationales and rehearsed their justifications. I simply won't argue with anyone who believes that. Hell, I won't even talk to them. They are Monsters, and I want nothing to do with them.

I truly don't understand how people become so arrogant. How does a person come to think of him or herself as "God's Gift" — deserving of more money and better treatment than the rest of us? What weird psychology leads to such a fucked-up conclusion about personal privilege?

OK, I get it that we are all subject to delusion, and that egomania is part of the human shadow. I accept also that with human beings, there's no way to achieve equality or equanimity. It may exist as a theoretical ideal, but not as a practical reality. Cosmic Oneness operates on a different level than earthly experience, where each individual has his or her own journey through life, and we're all different. Some people get more goodies, some get less. Suffering and joy are handed out to each of us in ultimately mysterious ways, and all the myriad teachings and disciplines — spiritual, psychological, and pragmatic — about how to reduce suffering and increase joy may or may not work very well for a given person or in a particular situation. I get all that.

But arrogance? The narcissistic hubris of actually believing that one is superior to others, or — at the very least — pretending to believe it? It doesn't matter to me whether that belief is inherent within a particular psyche, fostered by bullshit beliefs within a family system, or the result of apparent self-achievement. Whatever its source, arrogance flummoxes me. It is so obviously full of shit.

Now, in fairness, humility is not "*aw shucks, I'm not so great.*" No, true humility accurately acknowledges one's strengths and weaknesses, one's talents and failings. Arrogance, however, claims ownership of all the positives for the ego while either denying any of the negatives or blaming them on someone else.

Neurosis, self-doubt, and the struggle to accept oneself as even moderately OK make perfectly good sense to me. I understand feeling inferior. Same with occasional moments of temporarily excessive self-congratulation after a good experience. But arrogance as an ongoing state?

And yet, that seems to be what our culture rewards. I first noticed this as a young child, and it has continued unabated through my lifetime. If anything, our culture's accolades for narcissists and sociopaths are worse now than ever, seemingly tied even less than before to apparent achievements or merit, and much more to sheer celebrity, the crude fame of being a "star." And this shameful phenomenon isn't limited only to America. I'm hard-pressed to think of any society or culture that doesn't ruthlessly engage in defining a fraudulent pecking order of who's special and who's not.

One manifestation of false superiority is the tendency to point the finger at and punish others who fall from grace. Over-zealous moral reformers often suffer from this proclivity. Look at who America chooses to incarcerate (and who it chooses not to). Forgiveness as an expression of humility is something I like about the teachings of Jesus, but some Old-Testament-style Christians don't seem to take that seriously. Oh sure, they may forgive whoever they see as "us," but anyone who is regarded as "them" deserves punishment with all the severity that can be meted out.

Over my lifetime, and especially now during my elder years, I've gotten better at feeling forgiveness for a multitude of human failings — both my own and those of others. Of the so-called *capital vices* (more commonly known as the *seven deadly sins*), I've grown much more sympathetic to our human vulnerability around five of them — *lust*, *envy*, *gluttony*, *wrath*, and *sloth*. In recent years, I've even managed to make some progress toward forgiveness about *greed*. However, my heart remains stubbornly resistant against opening to the seventh and primary deadly sin — *pride*, which is synonymous with false superiority. I don't wish to characterize pride as somehow "unforgivable," but it comes closest and gives me the most trouble whenever I see it in myself or others.

The fact that I am bothered by this perverse notion of superiority — either for selected individuals or for whole groups of people ("the Chosen Ones"), and whether that fake status is self-proclaimed or conferred by others — makes it clear as a bell that my deep understanding of humanity remains inadequate.