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Is Capitalism a Revealed Religion?

Robert Anton Wilson

1961

...so sore mennes eyes were blinded
Where covetousnesse of filthie gaine is more than rea-
son minded. — Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Golding trans-
lation)

A friend of mine told me a story recently that makes a good introduction to a column about economics. It seems that my friend was in the men's room at his place of business, voiding his bladder energetically, when the President of his firm walked in and took a stance at the next urinal. A strange thing thereupon happened to my friend: his urine ceased spurting, even though he could still feel the pressure of an incompletely emptied bladder.

The reader may want to accuse me of surrealist symbolism, a dirty mind or a perverted sense of humor, but I can think of no better place to begin an examination of Capitalism than the lavatory. We are all aware by now, or should be aware, that Protestantism has played a large part in creating and maintaining the Capitalist ideology, and Protestantism itself began in a privy.

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This little-known fact is worth stressing, in the light of psycho-analytical theory. Luther's own words are: "But once when in this tower I was meditating on those words, 'the just lives by faith,' 'justice of God.' I soon had the thought whether we ought to live justified by faith [*the central doctrine of Protestantism* — R.A.W.]. This knowledge the Holy Spirit gave me on the privy in the tower" (quoted in *Luther* by H. Grisar).

All Protestant theology begins from, and pays tribute to, this "experience in the tower" — *Thurmerlehnis*, as it is called. That this experience could hardly have happened anywhere else but in a toilet is well documented by the anal and excremental style of Luther's fantasy: at least twice he had visions of the devil in which that Evil Spirit assaulted him by the time-honored gesture of contempt — "showing him his posterior," in Grisar's words.

More: this anal preoccupation colors Luther's entire sensibility. The Pope and his Bishops are, Luther says, "urine, excrement and filth... the filth of squiredom, dung splattered on the sleeve," etc. The devil wants to "stink us and stab us with his dung." As for mankind, "we are but worms in ordure and filth." Such quotes could be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*, certainly *ad nauseam*. Alfred North Whitehead was being accurate, not polemical, when he compared Luther's rhetoric to Hitler's, and said that Luther was "more foul-mouthed." Even facing death Luther could think in no other imagery: "I am the ripe shard," he said, "and the world is the gaping anus."

It was, I believe, Erich Fromm who first explained the connection between the Protestant ethic and the rise of Capitalism — a connection long noted and well documented by such sociologists as Tawney and Weber — by pointing out that both Protestantism and Capitalism are creations of what Freud called "anal personalities." Fromm, of course, has to dilute and obfuscate the basic Freudian insight in order to get it in line with his sociologicalization of psychology.

This dilution and obfuscation is what Fromm and other neo-Freudians celebrate as their “advance” over Freud’s “biological orientation.” What is primary to Fromm is not body-sensations but “attitudes toward the world” occasionally expressed “in the language of the body.” (I am paraphrasing and condensing from his *Escape from Freedom*.) Thus Freud’s clear and eminently scientific conception of the “anal personality” becomes vulgarized into the foggy and uselessly vague notion of the “authoritarian personality.”

I leave this de-materialized psychology to those professors who, finding it useful in mixed classrooms and inoffensive to the public at large, have embraced it. I take it that I have a body, and my reader has a body, and that we both had them long before we began developing “attitudes toward the world,” and that any psychology worth elbow-room at the counter of scientific consideration will have to be centered on these facts and on the pulsating rhythms of the living flesh.

Freud, like Marx — and, in a different way, like Cezanne — was gifted with a special kind of stupidity; a kind of stupidity which (I flatter myself) often appears in this column to the irritation of its readers. I mean the kind of stupidity that the little boy had in Anderson’s legend when he refused to see the Emperor’s new clothes. Marx was just dumb enough to ignore, or disbelieve, all the cultural prejudices of his infamous century and see with his own eyes that the relation of boss and worker is chiefly a physical relationship, an energy relationship, in which part of the worker’s energy is drained off much in the manner that a vampire’s victim has his blood sucked.

All ideological super-structure is built upon this simple energy process, and Marx was right in refusing to let any other fact or set of facts distract him from his unblinking examination of this central circumstance of our economic system. When the “natural sciences” and the “social sciences” are finally synthesized, this basic energy process will be their chief link, and will be formulated. I am convinced, in a Third Law of Thermodynamics.

Freud's stupidity was of an equally brilliant kind: he was the first psychologist really to understand the implications for psychology of the simple fact that people have bodies. (Cezanne's stupidity, similarly, was to look at the world as a child does and not as an art teacher tells one to.)

"...refresh my bowels in The Lord."

St. Paul, Philemon 1:20

But to return to my friend, standing there at the urinal in the grip of an unusual variety of impotence.

Readers are beginning to write in accusing me of being a Reichian. and I don't want to lend support to so terrible an accusation, but I also don't see, and can't see, how we can account for what happened here except by saying, in Reich's terms, that the presence of the President of the firm created an anxiety — and anxiety, to Dr. Reich, meant simply, physically, the withdrawal of life-energy from the periphery of the body to its core: a contraction. My friend's genital-urinary apparatus went dead as the energy flowed back into his center.

(For some interesting data tending to indicate the increasing prevalence of this anxious energy-contraction in American culture, see Lawrence Barth's column in the October 1960 *Realist*.)

An experience of my own comes to mind here. Recently, a guy I know got so damned mad at me that he refused to speak to me anymore. Readers of this column may figure he had good justification — and I would be the last one in the world to deny that, intent as I am on becoming known as the meanest literary bastard since Brann the Iconoclast — but the point is that my offense, in this case, was merely *speaking against the Capitalist system*. Being sent to Coventry for this, by a cat who has been only mildly peeved by my sexual and religious heresies, is what prompted the question asked in the title of this column: "Is Capitalism a Revealed Religion?" Has it now become so sacred that questioning it is more

about a system which increasingly blinds people to the joys of the senses and ties them down to a narrow groove of profit-seeking.

atomic bombs on two cities full of men, women and children, and which poured burning napalm on its enemies in Korea.

7. Recently, in Harmony, North Carolina, the American Legion staged a little rabbit hunt — for charitable purposes, of course. The rabbits were beaten to death with baseball bats.
8. The mysteries of Capitalist economics are held to be as sacred as those of any other religion — i.e., every other organized social neurosis. Only the “experts” are supposed to be able to understand “the rate of interest,” “the price of money,” the “dangers” of “inflation,” etc. The whole system — “the black magic of money,” as Pound once called it — simply rests upon *breeding* money as if it were alive. (“Is your gold ewes and rams?” — Shakespeare.) Or, as Paterson, the founder of the Bank of England, put it, “the bank hath interest on all mon-eyes it creates out of nothing.” This creation out of nothing is just what the infant wants to do with its feces, according to Freud, Jones, Ferenczi, Abraham, Menninger and other psychoanalysts. (Rexroth once paraphrased Dante’s analysis of this system by saying that, to Dante, the usurer is a pederast who wants to make his turds his heirs.)

I could go on, but what’s the use? Those who have had a little experience in psychiatry will know what I’m getting at: others will just laugh, as they’ve been laughing since Freud published his first case histories. I ask only one thing of skeptics: don’t bring up Soviet Russia, please. That horrible example of State Capitalism has nothing to do with what I, and other libertarian socialists, would offer as an alternative to the present system.

Dante said of the damned in hell that they were persons who had lost *il ben del’ intelletto*, which I don’t think it’s at all extravagant to translate as: their ability to *dig* things. This is not a Marxist kind of social criticism I have been presenting in this column, but just a way of saying that there’s something pathological, literally so,

dangerous than, let us say, asking if Jesus ever pulled his pudding as a boy?

I am going to come on so strong as to say that, in a Freudian sense, Capitalism always has been a revealed religion. (“Religion,” old Papa Sigmund once succinctly said, “is a public neurosis; neurosis is a private religion.”) *Capitalism, I would in all seriousness suggest, can best be understood as a public neurosis characteristic of societies in which the life energy has been driven out of the genital area into the anal area.* Being a public neurosis, it is institutionalized, ritualized and mystified with all the pomp and folderol of any other religion.

Let us look into the age that gave birth to Capitalism. The Late Middle Ages were a time of hysteria (always a result of prolonged anxiety states) and of witch-hunting (a symptom of hysteria) — and, finally, of impotence. The whole style of the age, as Spengler would call it, is well illustrated by *Rull Summa desiderantes* issued by Pope Innocent VIII:

“It has indeed lately come to Our ears,” wrote His Holiness, “that in some parts of Northern Germany... many persons of both sexes... have abandoned themselves to devils... and by their incantations, spells and conjurations... have slain infants yet in their mother’s womb, as also the offspring of cattle... These wretches further afflict and torment men and women... with terrible piteous pains and sore diseases; they hinder men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving, whence husbands cannot know their wives, or wives receive their husbands...”

It seems evident that, as G. Rattray Taylor notes in his brilliant *Sex in History*, Innocent was concerned “solely with certain pathological sexual phenomena... particularly psychic impotence and frigidity.” Taylor produces considerable evidence that such Papal

fears were well-grounded because the dictatorship of the Medieval Church was indeed so thoroughly destroying the normal sexual functioning of men and women as to create widespread impotence and infertility.

The witch-hunts of the period were almost all, Taylor demonstrates, brought on by people who, finding themselves impotent, accused some neighbor of “bewitching” them. The infamous *Malleus Malificarum*, the handbook used for centuries by witch-hunters and Inquisitors, reads like nothing so much as a modern textbook of sexual pathology.

It was out of the maelstrom that Protestantism and Capitalism emerged. As the genitals of the Western World died, its anus, so to speak, came to be its central living preoccupation — inspired and guided by the hysterical vision of one neurotic monk sitting on a john.

The psychoanalytical insight that money represents to the anal personality — the feces which it covets — is not really new or novel. Have we not always spoken of “filthy lucre?” Doesn’t Dante put the usurers and the buggers in one pocket of hell because both are “against natural increase?” Five hundred years after Dante, didn’t another great poet, who is markedly hostile to Freudian theory, intuitively make the same discovery:

Usury kills the child in the womb
And breaks short the young man’s courting
Usury brings age into youth; it lies between the
bride and the bridegroom
Usury is against Nature’s increase.

Yes, that is Ezra Pound, in his Canto 51. Elsewhere, Pound has indicated the same awareness of the pro- anal, anti-genital direction of the Capitalist (or, as he calls it, Usurocratic) temperament:

this national character changed markedly, so much so that it is difficult for us to imagine Falstaff and his friends as truly English. The modern post-Capitalist Englishman is the epitome of the armored individual, rigid, compulsively “moral,” utterly lacking in spontaneity. Simultaneously, England was the first nation *consciously* to idealize the completely frigid woman.

2. Capitalism was born in Germany, chiefly, and chiefly in the age of Luther.
3. Calvin’s fanatically anti-sexual regime in Geneva was also one of the primary creators of the Capitalist spirit. Raleigh, observing the deadness of the Genevese, remarked that they had “nothing left but their usury.”
4. As Capitalism came to dominance in Germany, the German national character became more and more rigid, armored, “closed” and secretive, lacking in play and spontaneity, etc. Out of this came the automaton who is a living caricature of humanity, the goose-stepping tin soldier known as the Nazi.
5. America, the only surviving 100% Capitalist nation, is the most Puritanical nation in the world. It is the only nation, indeed, which has executed a man in the 20th Century, not for murder, but (in effect) for a Sexual offense.
6. Desensitization in America is growing more appalling all the time. Lawrence Barth recounted in the *Realist* a few months ago an incident at a racetrack in Illinois where a section of the grandstand collapsed, killing and injuring a great number of people; the people in the uncollapsed part of the grandstand were completely unmoved, according to reports — even those sitting only a few feet from the groaning bodies of the victims. It is this country also which twice dropped

Yawning. Then, fully awake,
the cat goes out
to a night of poontang.

This is not just “the poet’s eye”; Cezanne had it. Nor is it the “artist’s eye”; Darwin had it when he looked at the iguana and intuited the law of evolution. It is the special kind of stupidity I was talking about earlier in this column. It is the innocent childish eye of a man who is not completely blinded by the organized bull-shit and desensitization of an unjust social system. It is obvious, or should be, that the prejudiced white never “sees” a Negro; he sees the social lies, stereotypes, in his own mind. (This is the point of the best novel ever written about the Negro in America, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.)

It should be equally obvious that, in a social system motivated by anxiety and a deadening of life energy, nobody even sees the street on which he lives anymore. We are walking dead men, as Lawrence tried so hard to show us in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, that great and mostly unread novel in which average readers hop around looking for symbolic sexual gratification and skipping the passages which give the book half its meaning — the passages about how Clifford’s impotence and paralysis drove him to becoming a successful businessman.

The whole world has been stunned for 17 years now by the opening, in 1944, of the Nazi annihilation camps. We still don’t know how to explain such things, how they could be possible. Let me bring this column toward a conclusion with a set of facts that may throw some light on what happened in Germany — and *is happening* here — facts which are all explained by my hypothesis that Capitalism derives from deadening of the genitals and centering of the interest in the anus, but which cannot be explained, so far as I know, by any other hypothesis.

1. The English of Shakespeare’s day were a bawdy, sexy, uninhibited bunch of hipsters. As Capitalism grew in England,

his condom full of black beetles, tattoo marks round
the anus,
and a circle of lady golfers about him.

the courageous violent
slashing themselves with knives the cowardly inciters
to violence...

the beast with a hundred legs, USURIA and the swill
full of respectors
bowing to the lords of the place, explaining its
advantages,
and the laudatores temporis acti claiming that the shit
used to be blacker and richer

(Canto 15)

At the end of Arthur Miller’s novel *The Misfits*, the hero curses, not “money,” but, significantly, “shit, and money.” Another artistic expression of the anal orientation of the modern world occurs in Norman Mailer’s “The Time of Her Time,” in which the protagonist, trying to cure his girl of frigidity, finds he can bring her to orgasm by entering *per anum*.

Actually, the psychoanalytical theory of money as a symbolic turd is already implicit in the Judeo-Christian myth of work as Adam’s Curse. Dr. Karl Menninger’s *The Human Mind* recounts a case-history of a millionaire who was compulsively busy to escape anxieties connected with infantile anal guilts. Similar cases appear in the works of Freud, Ferenczi and Jones, among others. Abraham describes in his *Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis* a patient whose anxieties centered around the idea of being forced to eat excrement as a punishment for sin: the theme of two or three of the most popular jokes in capitalist society.

“Work,” says Durkheim briefly, “is still for most men a punishment and a scourge.” Freud, perhaps, put it even more simply, in his study of Dostoevski, saying that Dostoevski was under a compul-

sion to make his burden of guilt take tangible form as a burden of debt. Norman Brown's brilliant *Life Against Death* (to which I am greatly indebted) sums it all up thusly: "Money is human guilt with the dross refined away till it is a pure crystal of self-punishment, but it remains filthy because it remains guilt."

It may seem almost too pat if we now remind ourselves that the congenital problem of Capitalism, never yet solved, is the problem of *dumping the surplus*.

The psycho-dynamics of Capitalism, in short, seem to consist of what cyberneticists call a *circular-causal* process. Born of neurotic anxiety and desensitization (contraction of the life energies), it constantly generates more anxiety through its unpredictable boom-and-bust cycles and the wars incident upon its imperialistic necessity to dump the surplus. But this second-order anxiety (which afflicts the boss as well as the worker, for he, too, is the victim of the cycle) breeds that "busy-busy-busy" compensating activity which drives the whole system ever onward into contradictions, crashes and further anxieties.

Dr. Wilhelm Reich's theory was that cancer is caused, partially, by the contraction of life energies, i.e., *anxiety*. (And anybody who doubts Reich's theory of anxiety only needs to observe himself in a moment of stress to be convinced that Reich was absolutely right. Improper breathing and what A. S. Neill calls "the stiff stomach danger" make up the feeling we call "anxiety" or "tension," and both are symptomatic of muscular contraction, such as we see on a very gross level in an infant *cringing* with fear.)

Consider, in the context of Reich's idea, the following words of one of the most enthusiastic defenders of modern American Capitalism, Dr. Ernest Dichter, President of The Institute of Motivational Research: "Possibly more than half of all human diseases are psychogenic." says Dr. Dichter in *The Strategy of Desire*; "worry, maladjustment and other emotional disturbances can be responsible for almost anything from heart attack to cancer." Dr. Dichter's job, as high-priest of Motivational Research, is using this "worry,

maladjustment and other emotional disturbances" to influence people to allow themselves to be exploited still further by the Power Elite of Capitalism.

According to the University of California's recent symposium on psychological factors in cancer, all the women with cancer of the breast examined by Dr. Franz Alexander in one study showed severe psychiatric disturbances, generally with some degree of sexual malfunctioning; another study, of women with cancer of the uterus, showed even more conspicuous sexual disturbances, especially of the sort called "frigidity" (*Psychological Variables in Human Cancer*, University of California Press).

Vihjalmur Stefansson's *Cancer: Disease of Civilization* points out that this pathology is rare, or non-existent, among primitive tribes. Need we add to this that the physical bearing of primitive peoples is so different from that of our so-called "civilization" that almost every explorer on record comes back with bemused comments on the subject? Primitive man, free of the anxieties and armors-against-anxiety characteristic of our culture, stands and walks and sits as a human being should, gracefully and naturally. Look around you and notice how much *visible* tension you can see in people's postures; and you will know why Dr. Reich called cancer a *shrinking biopathy*.

Our kindly editor has asked me to stop using the example of the guy walking into the park with a radio in his hand every time I want to say that people are dead in modern America. Okay. I will use another example. I once said to a young lady (who happened to be the wife of the guy who stopped talking to me when he found out I'm a socialist), "Dig that tree there — wow!" She replied, icily, "I *dug* it," putting me down for being so corny as to talk that way. The point was that she *hadn't* dug it; she had hardly glanced at it. Basho could flip over a sight as simple as a tom cat with the Yen, and write a poem about it: