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## Capitalism and Its Discontents: What Are We Living For?

By William Hawes  
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“Whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should also remain silent about fascism?”

-Max Horkheimer, from the essay “The Jews and Europe”, December 1939

Aren't we all tired of capitalism? Haven't most of us gotten sick of the drudgery, the monotony, the exploitation, sucking up to our bosses and management who pretend to care about the average worker? The drive to consume more and more has degraded all art, values, and sense of community in the US.

Capitalists literally are holding the people of the Earth in bondage. As liberal democracy crumbles in the West, the risk of neo-fascism continues to rise in North America and Europe.

It's worth examining why the US has TV shows like "Hoarders", where truly sick people have problems collecting useless crap, and where viewers publicly shame and judge the afflicted. Yet, where is the outrage at the real hoarders, the billionaires, the banks, and the military industrial complex? This is serious hypocrisy, a cultural blind spot: a double standard that is not being addressed by our society.

### **Capitalists are Addicts**

Why does society not ask arch-capitalists the obvious questions: when is enough, enough? Who needs a billion dollars? Once you can provide a comfortable life for your family, children, and grandchildren, what is the point of hoarding your money in bank accounts and lording over a monopolizing mega-corporation? Where does this endless desire for more come from?

It's fairly obvious that a failure to confront death is closely linked to the bottomless appetite exhibited by capitalists. The perceived need to construct towers, monuments, mansions, and manufactured narratives of their own greatness is proof. Not to mention how many of the super-rich have chosen to become cryogenically frozen post-mortem: this is in outright denial of their own mortality, and the necessity of death so that future generations may live.

In failing to confront death, any object can be used as a crutch, an addiction. Addiction is linked to social isolation and lack of community, which the capitalist class creates by artificially creating specialized divisions of labor, alienation, and class differences.

Addiction leads to a disconnection from what some would call a "reality principle", leading to further and deeper indulgences and lack of restraint. There are further similarities between capitalists and drug addicts: the impatience, the disconnection from others, the neediness, as well as a general childlike need to be validated and pampered.

### **Methodology and Treatment in an Age of Insanity**

We see where capitalism leads: to a permanent crisis, a never-ending state of emergency. Since the 1970s, workers have increased productivity mightily with little to zero increases in wages considering inflation and other factors. Americans are also working longer hours; young adults are even having less sex partly because of this. There is a huge problem with prescription drug abuse (not just opioids), teen suicide is rising (sadly, at a 40 year high for teen girls in 2017), and child poverty isn't being addressed properly, if at all, by our own government.

All of these absolutely tragic issues are connected to capitalism. When we are forced to compete against each other, in grades at school, for that raise or promotion in the workplace, this breeds a mindset of dehumanization.

I would also posit that the separation of young children from their parents when they begin schooling, either day care or pre-school or kindergarten or afterwards, is one of the first steps in life where the feelings of individual atomization starts, and collective social disintegration begins. Being ripped from your parent's arms because they have to work just to survive, and the state/private/charter school substituting for the role of a parent, is one of the first deep tragedies inflicted on many of us by the “needs” of the modern world. I believe this suffering is lodged deep in our unconscious selves, and this is not being addressed publicly at all, and barely acknowledged in our private lives.

Treatment starts when we want to become free of the Great Beast of capitalism, the “Babylon system” as some like to call it. We must ground ourselves, and return to a deeper relationship with our mother Earth. Self-reliance is true freedom, and families and communities should begin to grow as much of their own food as possible. I understand the limitations for those in urban areas, or those stuck in jobs where time and effort cannot be adequately put towards farming, of course. Collectively, as a city block, a suburban neighborhood, a rural township, we are all going to have to learn to get together, share food and technology, and become independent of this beast. We must begin to develop a gift economy, an indigenous-based economy, based on reciprocity and trust, not exploitation and coercion, as Charles Eisenstein explains.

Other than that, a mass protest movement must be created so the resources that our federal government receives in taxes can be shifted from weapons of destruction to schools, health care, community projects, and renewable energy.

### **Analyzing a Popular Alternative**

I believe it's important to discuss some of the budding alternatives to capitalism that are developing around the globe. In the US, support for socialism has risen immensely, especially among the younger crowd, thanks to the work of Bernie Sanders (notwithstanding him not really being a socialist) and others. Yet how serious are most American socialists?

One of the most popular groups in the US is called Socialist Alternative (SA), led by the charismatic Seattle councilwoman Kshama Sawant. SA has some great ideas, and yet, some of their proposals make it seem as if they're just going through the motions. Let me explain.

On their about page, a few things stand out. They write: “We see the global capitalist system as the root cause of the economic crisis, poverty, discrimination, war, and environmental destruction.” Very well put. Yet then, this is followed by the line below:

“As capitalism moves deeper into crisis, a new generation of workers and youth must join together to take the top 500 corporations into public ownership under democratic control to end the ruling elites’ global competition for profits and power.”

This *sounds nice*, but I wonder how much time was really spent thinking through the implications of this policy. What if democratic control only leads to redistribution of the companies' wealth, and not fundamental transformation of the products, resource usage, and dangerous working conditions? Where is the sense of urgency, the fact that deadlines are being approached regarding global warming, regarding the ecological damage being done by these companies?

One wonders, has SA bothered to take a look at the list of the 500 top companies? For some, perhaps they can be repurposed to make sustainable products. For others, maybe the factories and warehouses can be dismantled and recycled for public use. For a few, it might be feasible that they could be broken up into smaller entities and non-profit co-operatives.

Yet, we must realize that these companies have only been able to thrive due to government tax breaks, insider trading, off-shoring hidden wealth, and other financial chicanery. Further, these mega corporations rely on specialized division of labor, fueling worker alienation.

Also, the biggest companies choose not to compete against each other in entire sectors, allowing for large profit margins. What happens when "public ownership" leads to stricter completion and price wars, forcing many employees to be laid off? How will these companies be able to compete against Europe and China? Is SA committed to local and bioregional approaches to agricultural and socially responsible industrial practices?

For many of these companies, though, the only democratic thing I can think of to do is to vote on who gets to throw the first brick or Molotov through the empty building. These corporations have done irreparable harm to the planet. Some of them are simply not going to be able to be reformed.

The only way to transform these entities (the ones that can be saved) properly, with the proper protections, would be to rewrite the constitution to include environmental and social rights, as well as the rights of mother Earth, as Bolivia has done. Without a legal framework based on ecology, there is no way to make sure "democratic control" of a transnational corporation would actually lead to environmentally-safe production.

SA is notable for fighting for a \$15 an hour wage. First, I want to say that I support this policy. It is a laudable goal, and may work soon in some of the nations wealthy, tech-savvy, coastal metro enclaves.

Yet we need to ask what would happen if this were enacted nationally, and what we should do to prepare if it ever does. The elites would pull their money out of the system, if only to spite the Left and the socialists who enacted the policy, and give them a taste of pain for disobeying capitalism. The neoliberal economy is designed around low-wage service work, and is so tightly interwoven, not to mention extremely monopolized, that a sudden wage rise would lead to high levels of inflation, and possibly to a severe economic recession or depression. Are groups like SA ready to organize outside the political structure, to make space for a civic society, domestically and abroad, which will need massive influxes of resources, food, and housing when shit hits the fan?

SA also wants to “slash the military budget”, which is great. SA does not clarify where that new money should go. SA also proclaims that they support internationalism. Allow me to make a proposal: money from the military budget should be given away freely to developing countries, with transnational groups, either under UN auspices or some new framework, helping distribute and allocate resources so they are not wasted by corrupt dictators and governments. Poorer nations will need massive influxes of revenue to help them develop and avoid using fossil fuels and habitat-destroying industry, in the realm of trillions of dollars over decades. The West has accumulated ill-gotten wealth from centuries of colonialism, chattel slavery, and genocidal policies towards the “Global South”, and now may be the last chance to give back, before it becomes too late.

Are US socialists committed to these sorts of radical proposals? Are SA and others ready to admit to its followers that real socialism will involve hard sacrifices, and almost certainly (in the short term, at least) lead to less material goods and privileges that Westerners have enjoyed for centuries? Are socialists as ready to support a living wage in China as they are in the USA? Finally, are American socialists committed to transforming the nation, or just promoting an ideology that is centered too much on human needs, and not enough on the needs of non-humans and future human generations?

### **Ecocentrism, not Anthropocentrism**

The Left has been fragmented for decades. Liberals, socialists, communists, greens, and anarchists have all endlessly debated future models for society. One wonders, how many are just talking, and how many are willing to listen? There already are models for society to live sustainably and to prosper, very, very old ways: by following the paths set by the indigenous.

For instance: by living in the moment, and observing things as they really are, it becomes quite clear that humanity is facing huge challenges unlike at any other time in history. Just one hundred companies have pumped out 70% of worldwide greenhouse gases since 1988. Is the answer, as SA has posited, really just to democratize these corporations and hope for the best, or to shut them down completely?

Westerners are going to have to realize very quickly that despite our space technology, skyscrapers, and instant media, we are the children in the room when it comes to ecological knowledge, and the indigenous around the world are the adults. Native American tribes and various indigenous peoples worldwide have catalogued thousands if not tens of thousands of local plants in their local ecosystems, often with hundreds of different uses for each individual plant. Indigenous accept their own mortality and have constructed elaborate rituals, ceremonies, and initiations to help each other confront death. Also, and this is critical, indigenous tribes understand their carrying capacity in their local habitat, so are able to regulate and rationally plan for their population levels. Overpopulation now threatens the world with ecosystem degradation, habitat destruction, global warming, resource wars, ocean acidification, plastics proliferation, pandemics, and mass starvation and drought.

The indigenous are plant people, and we can follow just a few basic ideas to help us escape capitalism: conserve what remains of the South American, African, and Southeast Asian

rainforests, as many future cures from disease and chronic conditions will be found there. In the Americas, the *milpa*, a planting of corn, beans, squash, and various nutrient rich veggies allows for huge crop productivity in a small area. We can use hemp and legalize cannabis to make biofuels, produce paper, make innovative building materials like Hempcrete, and provide the masses with a safe, relaxing herb for recreational, medicinal, and spiritual use.

Advanced technology in most scenarios will only make things worse. What is the best thing one can do to stop global warming? Not a solar array, but planting a tree. Slow down soil erosion? Plant a tree. What is resistance? Planting a community garden is a more socialist, a more significant thing to do now than attending another symposium on Marxism.

The indigenous are freer and happier than Westerners not by some innate abilities, but because they have chosen to work for their freedom: by co-producing food, tools, clothes, pottery, by hunting, fishing, and foraging together. Westerners have refused to resist thus far, because deep down, many know they are dependent on the system for survival, and don't want to pull that plug, to bite the hand that feeds. It's the only way, though. We are going to have to walk away from all this, and activists, protestors, and concerned citizens are going to have to metaphorically step into our own Lacandon jungle, and organize around ecology, democracy, and social justice.

Yet, we must realize that it is too late in the game to rely simply on voting. Citizens will respond to a mass movement to the degree that it represents the will of the people: to the degree it can articulate a political truth on a deeply visceral level. Most mainstream socialists (important exceptions being Ian Angus, Paul Burkett, and John Bellamy Foster) have so far been too committed to a flailing, abstract ideology; specifically, wrongly committed to a Eurocentric, technocratic, anthropocentric worldview; to capture people's imaginations. Developing an ecological worldview, one that acknowledges our interdependence and interconnectedness with all species, is crucial.

Thus, as the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses, Standing Rock will eventually be seen as having more influence than Occupy Wall Street. We are connected to our planet and the web of life more than we can ever know or attempt to explain. For instance, we won't end warfare until we abolish factory farming: the two are intimately linked, as exploitation of man over animal allows fascists the ideological justification for exploitation and the killing of man by man. Ecology is the keystone science: it allows us to see the linkages between species, food webs, and provides the science needed to develop scale-appropriate, sustainable technology. Ecologists understand that an injury to one is an injury to all, and under capitalism, we've all been wounded, plant, animal, and human alike, even the rich, who've suffered spiritual decay and moral disintegration.

The only democracy possible is an ecological democracy, with a long-term planning, and rational, sustainably-oriented national constitutions, a 90-95% reduction in fossil fuel use within a few decades at most, and an international consensus which will guarantee safeguards against habitat destruction, even in the face of democratic majority opposition. If we don't face up to these facts, and collectively and courageously organize, we may in fact be due for the Kali Yuga, as the Hindus prophesied.

Thus, perhaps we can update and re-phrase Horkheimer's famous quote for the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

“Whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should also remain silent about the 6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction.”