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## Greed Kills



President Donald Trump with reporters, Elon Musk and X Æ A-Xii in the White House Oval Office on February 11, 2025. Photo: The White House (Wikimedia Commons)

### **Musk and Trump: A morbid spectacle**

The spectacle of two billionaires – let’s call them M’ump — wanting more and more money and power is mortifying. No matter how much they have, it’s not enough. Their press conference in the Oval Office a couple of weeks ago — an old man slumped at the Resolute Desk, and a younger one posing, strutting and spouting inanities — could have been filmed in a crack house. Their addiction was showing. How many viewers averted their eyes in embarrassment?

M’ump has a disease, many psychologists argue, called “Narcissistic Personality Disorder” (NPD). The narcissist, according to well recognized symptomology, strives to demonstrate his superiority. He insists he is smarter, stronger, funnier, and better at sex than anyone else. He wants to be richer and more powerful too, and sometimes – as in the case of M’ump – he is. But that superiority produces no lasting satisfaction. To get his narcissistic fix, he must

diminish, even destroy others, the better to affirm himself. At war with the world, he is a stranger to love, except self-love. But without a regular dose of adoration or fear, even that emotion is cribbed. When a person with NPD is furnished weapons or powerful institutions, he becomes dangerous, even deadly. Driven by motives both apparent and obscure, M’ump has forced hundreds of thousands into hiding or onto unemployment lines. His narcissistic impulses may soon kill thousand and endanger millions.

M’ump seems like an alien from Mars, but in fact, he is familiar, or at least his characteristic mentality is — greed. Everybody knows someone greedy; we’re greedy ourselves sometimes. The difference between us and M’ump is the duration and scale of avarice: M’ump is always and colossally greedy — morbidly greedy. But recognition of his greed – and its political foundation — may offer us a way to challenge it. Precisely because we instinctively revile greed, we can organize to stop it. Our slogan is simple: “Greed kills.”

### **Cultural and religious aversion to greed**

Abhorrence of greed is as universal as the incest taboo. Among foragers (“hunter-gatherers”) – whose mode of living prevailed for 90% of human history — sharing was the norm and hoarding punished by ostracism or other sanctions. (There are only a few surviving foraging communities.) But even in intensely hierarchical, pre-capitalist societies, reciprocity or “guest-friendship” – what the ancient Greeks called *xenia* (ξενία) – was the rule. Strangers must be greeted with gifts of food, drink, lodging, and even entertainment such as story-telling or song. They in turn must be courteous and reciprocate as hosts whenever they can.



Peter Paul Rubens (or workshop), Zeus, Hermes, Philemon and Baucis, c. 1625. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (public domain)

Violation of the principle of *xenia* can lead to violence, even war. The Homeric epic begins with just such a breach: Paris, Menelaus's guest at Sparta, kidnaps Helen to begin the Trojan war. In the end, Paris is killed, Troy is destroyed, and Helen is returned. There are multiple instances of *xenia* in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, including *theoxenia*, when a host welcomes a stranger who turns out to be a god. There's a well-known example of *theoxenia* in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (8 C.E.). Disguised as peasants, Zeus and Hermes travel to Phrygia where they are repeatedly denied hospice. At the home of Philemon and Baucis however, they are greeted warmly and invited to share a meal. After revealing their divinity, they instruct the elderly couple to leave their home so they can destroy the city with a flood while not harming them. After the water receded, a temple appears where the couple's home had been, and Philemon and Baucis are granted their wish to become its caretakers.

The sin of the biblical inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah is usually understood to be lust. But according to early Rabbinic or Talmudic scholars (> 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), their chief offense against God was greed — failure to extend hospitality to strangers. The Babylonian Talmud lists seven sins that if committed, bring on the plague of leprosy. One of them was “envy,” which encompassed greed and covetousness, prohibited by the tenth commandment of the Decalogue of Moses. Still today, the idea of welcoming strangers into one's home survives among Jews in the ritual of Passover. It's considered a *mitzvah* to welcome anyone who's hungry to the feast, gentiles as well as Jews. At the conclusion of the *seder*, a door is opened and a glass of wine poured to accommodate the prophet Elijah, harbinger of the Messiah. The ritual is a re-enactment of *theoxenia*: a god disguised as a mortal stranger is welcomed into the home and given succor. Any Jew today who begins the Passover seder with the benediction “this is the bread of our affliction, let all who are hungry come and eat,” but reject immigrants, is a hypocrite and a *shanda* (שנדה).

*Xenia* is also central to Christian teaching. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples (including Judas), fed a multitude, and offered shelter to the poor, sick, lost and homeless. The Apostle Paul admonished Christ's followers to “pursue hospitality” (Romans 12:13). The 4<sup>th</sup> century Julian the Hospitaller, patron saint of hospitality, renounced wealth and vain pursuits (especially hunting) to create a hospice for sick or weary pilgrims. St. Francis of Assisi ministered to the poor and the sick, and even extended *xenia* to animals and the inanimate world, “brother sun” and “sister moon.” The current fury against immigrants among white

evangelicals is thus in profound opposition to longstanding doctrine in all Christian denominations. Anyone who builds walls to keep out immigrants, according to the current Pope Francis, “is not Christian.” He also said: “Greed is a sickness of the heart, not of the wallet.”

### **Capitalist greed: Adam Smith and Karl Marx**

The two greatest theorists of capitalism also believed greed was bad, though for different reasons. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith argued that self-interest among tradesmen and manufacturers was to be applauded because it spurred over-production, abundance, low prices and general prosperity. (This would later be called supply-side or trickle-down economics.) But in *Wealth* and his earlier book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Smith also tempered this viewpoint. Because we live in community with others, we have an obligation to protect the general welfare. Smith writes: “When the happiness or misery of others depends in any respect upon our conduct, we dare not, as self-love might suggest to us, prefer the interest of one to that of many”. Moreover, greed is eventually checked by public outrage, while fairness is validated by approbation. People prefer to truck with generous traders than greedy ones. A good capitalist is ethical, he claimed.

Historical evidence suggests otherwise. The textile manufacturers of early 19<sup>th</sup> C. Britain, the robber barons of early 20<sup>th</sup> C. America, and the pharmaceutical manufacturers, oil giants, online retailers, hedge fund traders, and social media executives of today became immensely rich by exploiting employees, abusing customers, and degrading the very climate. There are thousands of other examples of greedy businessmen who are wildly successful. Elon Musk is the world’s richest man because he has fought off unions, layed off masses of workers, and soiled the internet with hatred and lies. He gives little to charity. Trump has become the most powerful person in the world by cheating creditors, lying to customers, abusing women, and attacking the weakest and most vulnerable people – migrants and asylum seekers. He too is uncharitable. Greed is universally regarded as evil, but it pays. Karl Marx explained why.

Marx was capitalism’s greatest admirer, but also its most trenchant critic. He recognized that modern trade and manufacturing created enormous wealth and the material basis for a society of abundance and mutuality – but only if capitalism was eventually superseded. The system’s fundamental feature – the production and exchange of commodities for the sake of profit — was also an agent of moral degradation. Capitalist production

“has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc. . . .

In the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*.”

This exaltation of the “sense of having” – we may call it greed – has destroyed our relationships with others, deranged our sensibilities, and even diminished our physical pleasures. Marx wrote this in 1844, well before his magnum opus, *Capital* (1867). In the latter work, he recognized more clearly that it wasn’t greed per se that drove the capitalist, but the requirement to increase profits to compete with other capitalists. Under conditions of capitalist competition, Frederick Engels wrote in 1877:

“The bare factual possibility of [the capitalist] extending his sphere of production, becomes transformed, for him, into a compulsory law. The enormous expansive force of modern industry...appears now before our eyes as a qualitative and quantitative *need* to expand which laughs at all resistance.”

Greed or the desire to accumulate, according to Marx and Engels, was not a bug in the system of capitalist production, but its key feature. And what’s true at the individual level, is true at the system level: A functioning, capitalist economy must always be growing. “Accumulate, accumulate!” Marx wrote in *Capital*: “That is Moses and the prophets!” But because production is a social enterprise – think factory floor, department store or warehouse – workers can join and resist their alienation and exploitation. They can fight a system of rationalized greed. Capitalism, the argument goes, spawns its own gravediggers. (But when?)

#### **Erich Von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1924)**

*Greed* is a film classic and a polemic against avarice. Its creator, Erich von Stroheim, wrote the screenplay (based upon a popular novel by Frank Norris) produced the film, directed it, and even hand color-tinted some of the frames. He was given near complete creative independence by his studio boss, Abe Lehr at the Goldwyn Company, but overplayed his hand. The film went way over budget and ran nearly six hours; the plan was to show it in theatres on consecutive days with intermissions. When Irving Thalberg replaced Lehr as studio head just prior to the film’s release, he demanded it be drastically cut – it was reduced to just two hours with lots of titles inserted to ensure continuity. That’s the version best known today. In 1999, a nearly four-hour version was constructed using recovered stills.





[http://Erich von Stroheim, Dir., Greed, 1924. \(Screen shot\)](http://Erich von Stroheim, Dir., Greed, 1924. (Screen shot))

The film was formally innovative. Von Stroheim deployed montage, derived from Sergei Eisenstein, chiaroscuro, as seen in Robert Weine's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and deep focus, found in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). That the director's cinematic lexicon came in part from horror films was not coincidental. *Greed* was a kind of horror film: The female protagonist, named Trina Sieppe (played by ZaSu Pitts), changes from blushing bride to grotesque miser, and her husband John McTeague (Gilbert Gowland) from dentist to double murderer. They are each vampiric, and Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1899) and its film adaptation by Murnau are each recalled.



Funeral cortege shown in deep focus, behind marriage ceremony in foreground of *Greed*, 1924. (Screen shot).

But if the film is avant-garde in style and subject, its politics are more rear facing. Though it's possible to find in the film a critique of the gross, economic inequalities engendered by contemporary capitalism (the "Roaring '20s"), the film is more plausibly a throwback to pre-Marxist critiques of wealth, such as by Thomas Carlyle. In the first chapter of *Past and Present* (1843) titled "Midas," Carlyle writes:

"Laissez-faire, Supply-and-demand — one begins to be weary of all that. Leave all to egoism, to ravenous greed of money, of pleasure, of applause: — it is the Gospel of Despair!" That last phrase, "Gospel of Despair" would have been a good subtitle for *Greed*. Trina wins \$5000 in a lottery but is miserable, vowing never to spend a penny of it. Her slow-witted husband McTeague tolerates her avarice, until he loses his job as a dentist because of the treachery of his former friend Marcus Schouler (Jean Hersholt) who exposes to authorities McTeague's lack of professional credentials. After that, McTeague grows impatient, and then desperate for money. When Trina refuses to part with any, he kills her and flees their home in San Francisco for the wilderness, ultimately crossing Death Valley by mule. That's where he meets Marcus, who wants to capture his former friend to collect a bounty, as well as the \$5,000 in gold that McTeague took from his wife. In the climactic scene, the two fight until Marcus is killed. But in the struggle, McTeague's last canteen of water is destroyed, and he becomes handcuffed to Marcus. The last shot of the film is of a parched desert with slumped figures in the distant background, one dead, the other awaiting death's deliverance.

The specific, capitalist character of modern greed is nowhere to be seen in the film. In 1924, the richest man in the world was John D. Rockefeller, a billionaire monopolist, whose worth equaled almost 3% of U.S. gross domestic product. If the film were true to modern greed, Trina would have used some of her fortune to bribe a city official so that her husband could have stayed in business as a dentist. She'd then have expanded the practice, bought out rivals and established a monopoly in San Francisco. With accumulated profits, she would have purchased the companies that make dental equipment. Finally, having achieved vertical and horizontal integration and a vast fortune, she would have established the Sieppe/McTeague Foundation to cleanse her reputation by giving money to arts organizations, hospitals and universities.

### **Understanding M'ump**

Two-headed M'ump has no antipathy to greed. He's a pathological narcissist who endangers democracy with his impulsivity. But to understand this better, M'ump must now be disambiguated.

Donald Trump is a real estate developer born of a Brooklyn developer, Fred Trump. The latter succeeded by stealth, craft, glad-handing, and graft; he lined the pockets of Democratic Party *machers* and was rewarded with planning approvals, zoning variances, and tax write-offs. The son's initial triumph, the acquisition and refurbishment of the old Commodore Hotel on East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, was made possible by Fred's connections, party machine donations, and the help of mob lawyer Roy Cohn, Senator Joe McCarthy's chief counsel during the Army-McCarthy hearings.

Trump lacked his father's savvy. In Manhattan in the 1980s, he was a bull in a China shop. His vulgarity, promiscuity and ostentation, his cooperation with mob bosses from the Genovese and Gambino crime families, and general air of hucksterism, turned off politicians and investors. Long time New York mayor Ed Koch said: "I wouldn't believe Donald Trump if his tongue was notarized," and called him "greedy, greedy, greedy." Trump's deals in the 1990s to develop casinos, airlines, hotels and yachts were all flops, leading to six commercial bankruptcies. But by dint of luck and prevarication, Donald landed a job as host of a new TV series, "The Apprentice." Over the course of his 14 years on the program, he made over \$200 hundred million. Combined with the \$413 million he received from his father over the years, he was by the time of his first presidential campaign in 2016, a very rich man.

But if Trump's actual business moxie is mythical, his self-identification as a successful real estate entrepreneur is real. And like the hedgehog, he understands one big thing: that speculation in land is a potential source of wealth, and that the purchase of low value residences or businesses, and their re-sale as higher value ones is his purpose in life. In recent years, rent has supplanted arbitrage as his main income source, especially the franchising of the Trump name. Rent, Marx observed in Capital, vol. III, is an unusual source of value for three reasons:

"In the first place, by the preponderant influence exerted here by location.... And secondly, by the palpable and complete passiveness of the owner, whose sole activity consists...in exploiting the progress of social development, toward which he contributes nothing and for which he risks nothing, unlike the industrial capitalist; and finally by the...shameless exploitation of poverty, for poverty is more lucrative for house-rent than the mines of Potosi ever were for Spain."

Trump's attitude toward governance is that of the developer and rent-seeker. He wants to seize Gaza, move out the beleaguered Palestinians, and lease the cleared land for a new Riviera. He wants Ukraine to promise him a portion of the value of its natural resources (rent) in exchange for not abandoning them to the predations of Russia. He wants the Panama Canal



so he can collect rent from it, and Greenland to lease out its mineral rights. He admires the U.S. fossil fuel and mining industries not just because they maim and kill millions (Trump enjoys the spectacle of ruthlessness in others) but because they are the most successful rent-seeking enterprises in the history of the world. Renewable energy does not generate ground rent to nearly the same extent; in fact, distributed solar (rooftops) creates almost none – Trump loathes it. Trump’s greed is thus both old school and up-to-the-moment, but it always involves the “shameless exploitation of poverty.”

Musk’s greed takes a different form. He’s an industrialist and more recently, a social media and tech tycoon. Except for their narcissism and greed, he and Trump have little in common. Musk made his money from automobile manufacturing, like Henry Ford 120 years before, but with this difference: He invented nothing, and was supported for years by subsidies from the federal government (\$465 million in 2010), consumer tax rebates on electric cars, and tax credits paid by U.S. car manufacturers who fail to sell the federally mandated number of low-emission vehicles. In addition, Musk benefitted from quantitative easing during and just after the pandemic. When in 2020, the U.S. Federal Reserve bought \$700 billion in assets to boost market liquidity, it increased share prices in nearly all sectors. The value of Elon Musk’s shares in Tesla increased in a single year from \$25 billion to \$150 billion. Since that time, the ongoing asset bubble – plus market optimism from Trump’s support — has multiplied Musk’s worth by three, even as sales of Teslas have slumped badly. In addition, the U.S. space program has now largely been privatized, enabling Musk’s SpaceX to collect billions more in profit, even while blowing up at least half a dozen rockets in the process. (A public agency like NASA wouldn’t be allowed so many failures.) Internal share trading has now made SpaceX the most valuable private start-up company ( a “unicorn”) in the world.

Musk is also a rentier, or what some call a “neo-feudal” capitalist. His platform X, formerly Twitter, makes most of its money by data licensing (selling or renting user information for AI training) and ads (renting eyeballs to advertisers). X users are thus “serfs”, providing value without being paid. That makes Musk lord of the manner, and he acts it – strutting, preening, boasting, and goading others to ravage and pillage. The spectacle of the world’s richest man gleefully firing probationary workers making \$35,000 per year is gross. He wants more and more and will part with nothing. He is like Trina in *Greed*; Trump may in time tire of his antics and become McTeague.

### **Greed kills**

I have called the spectacle of M’ump mortifying, embarrassing and gross. But in fact, it’s worse; it’s deadly. Last week, *The New York Times* published a story about M’ump’s

dismantling of USAID. Counterpunch readers are likely aware of the organization's serious limitations: that most of the funding goes to a small number of intermediary organizations that purchase U.S. not local supplies and foodstuffs; that USAID has in the past been complicit in U.S. terror, and that its impact on global health and welfare over the life of the organization (founded during the Kennedy administration) has been negligible. And yet: programs in Sudan and Nigeria to fend off malnutrition, and in Kenya to treat tuberculosis and H.I.V. have been halted. Polio may return to the places it has been eliminated. In Afghanistan, an online women's university has been shut down since late January. In Indonesia, initiatives to treat malaria and H.I.V. have ended. And so on.

In the U.S., funding to monitor toxic chemicals in the air and water and protect drinking water from sewage and agricultural run-off have been frozen or rescinded. Disaster relief has been stopped. The poorest communities in the country – white and Black, rural and urban, red states and blue states – are the worst impacted, but everyone suffers (and thousands will die) from diminished air quality and additional toxins in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat. In nearly every culture and religion, individual greed is considered a sin or perhaps a mental illness. At the scale it is practiced by Trump and Musk, it's nothing less than murder.

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